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ENSIGN FLANDRY

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# Amazing

stories

October, 1966

Vol. 40, No. 8

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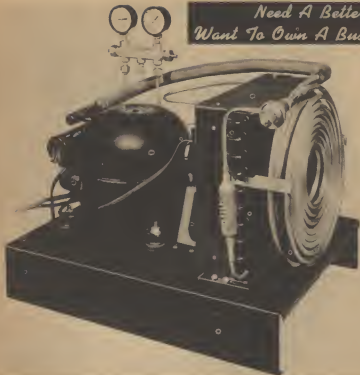
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*By now Poul Anderson has done enough Dominic Flandry stories—see Agent of the Terran Empire and Flandry of Terra, both from Chilton Books—to make Earth's top secret agent almost as popular in science fiction as James Bond is out of it. This new Flandry yarn tops them all, though, for what greater fun is there than reading about a favorite fictional character when he's just a stripling, a mere ensign stationed on an insignificant little world where—unless he can learn the secret of Starkad—Terra's entire fleet will vaporize in less than an Earthside hour!*

# ENSIGN FLANDRY

# POUL ANDERSON

Illustrated By Gray Morrow

NIGHT on Starkad—Tallest in the central spine of Kursoviki island was Mount Narpa, peaking at almost twelve kilometers. So far above sea level, atmospheric pressure was near Terran standard, a man could safely breathe and men had erected Highport. It was a raw sprawl of spacefield and a few score prefabs, housing no more than five thousand; but it was growing. Through the walls of his office, Commander Max Abrams, Imperial Naval Intelligence Corps, heard metal clang and construction machines rumble.

His cigar had gone out again.

He mouthed the stub until he finished reading the report on his desk, then leaned back and touched a lighter to it. Smoke puffed up toward a blue cloud which already hung under the ceiling of the bleak little room. The whole place stank. He didn't notice.

"Damn!" he said. And deliberately, for he was a religious man in his fashion, "God damn!"

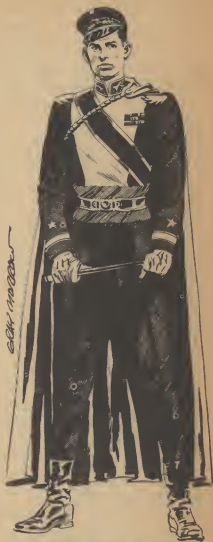
Seeking calmness, he looked at the picture of his wife and children. But they were home, on Dayan, in the Vega region of the Empire, more parsecs distant than he liked to think. And remote in time as well. He hadn't been

with them for over a year. Little Miriam was changing so he'd never recognize her, Marta wrote, and David become a lanky hobbledohoy and Yael seeing such a lot of Abba Perlmutter, though of course he was a nice boy... There was only the picture, separated from him by a clutter of papers and a barricade of desk machines. He didn't dare animate it.

*Nor feel sorry for yourself, you clotbrain.* The chair creaked beneath his shifted weight. He was a stocky man, hair grizzled, face big and hooknosed. His uniform was rumpled, tunic collar open, twin planets of his rank tarnished on the wide shoulders, blaster at belt. He hauled his mind back to work.

Wasn't just that a flitter was missing, nor even that the pilot was probably dead. Vehicles got shot down and men got killed more and more often. Too bad about this kid, who was he, yes, Ensign Dominic Flandry. *Glad I never met him. Glad I don't have to write his parents.* But the area where he vanished, that was troubling. His assignment had been a routine reconnaissance over the Zletovar Sea, not a thousand kilometers hence. If the Merseians were getting that aggressive...

Were they responsible, though? Nobody knew, which was why the report had been bucked on to the Terran mission's chief of Intel-



**ENSIGN DOMINIC FLANDRY**

ligence. A burst of static had been picked up at Highport from that general direction. A search flight had revealed nothing except the usual Tigery merchant ships and fishing boats. Well, engines did conk out occasionally; material was in such short supply that the ground crews couldn't detect every sign of mechanical overwork. (When in hell's flaming name was GHQ going to get off its numb butt and realize this was no "assistance operation to a friendly people" but a war?) And given a brilliant sun like Saxo, currently at a peak of its energy cycle, no tricks of modulation could invariably get a message through from high altitudes. On the other hand, a scout flitter was supposed to fail safe and contain several backup systems.

And the Merseians were expanding their effort. *We don't do a mucking thing but expand ours in response. How about making them respond to us for a change?* The territory they commanded grew steadily bigger. It was still distant from Kursoviki by a quarter of the planet's circumference. But might it be reaching a tentacle this way?

*Let's ask. Can't lose much.*

Abrams thumbed a button on his vidiphone. An operator looked out of the screen. "Get me the greenskin cinc," Abrams ordered.

"Yes, sir. If possible."

"Better be possible. What're

you paid for? Tell his cohorts all gleaming in purple and gold to tell him I'm about to make my next move."

"What, sir?" The operator was new here.

"You heard me, son. Snarch!"

Time must pass while the word seeped through channels. Abrams opened a drawer, got out his magnetic chessboard, and pondered. He hadn't actually been ready to play. However, Runei the Wanderer was too fascinated by their match to refuse an offer if he had a spare moment lying around; and damn if any Merseian son of a mother was going to win at a Terran game.

Hm... promising development here, with the white bishop...no, wait, then the queen might come under attack...tempting to sic a computer onto the problem... betcha the opposition did...maybe not...ah, so.

"Commandant Runei, sir."

An image jumped to view. Abrams could spot individual differences between nonhumans as easily as with his own species. That was part of his business. An untrained eye saw merely the alienness. Not that the Merseians were so odd, compared to some. Runei was a true mammal from a terrestroid planet. He showed reptile ancestry a little more than Homo Sapiens does, in hairless pale-green skin, faintly scaled, and short triangular spines running



from the top of his head, down his back to the end of a long heavy tail. That tail counterbalanced a forward-leaning posture, and he sat on the tripod which it made with his legs. But otherwise he rather resembled a tall, broad man. Except for heavy complex bony convolutions in place of external ears, and brow ridges over hanging the jet eyes, his head and face might almost have been Terran. He wore the form-fitting black and silver uniform of his service. Behind him could be seen on the wall a bellmouthed gun, a ship model, a curious statuette; souvenirs of far stars.

"Greeting, Commander." He spoke fluent Anglic, with a musical accent. "You work late."

"And you've dragged yourself off the rack early," Abrams grunted. "Must be about sunrise where you are."

Runei's glance flickered toward a chrono. "Yes, I believe so. But we pay scant attention here."

"You can ignore the sun easier'n us, all right, squatted down in the ooze. But your native friends still live by this cheap two-thirds day they got. Don't you keep office hours for them?"

Abrams' mind ranged across the planet, to the enemy base. Starkad was a big world, whose gravity and atmosphere gnawed land masses away between tectonic epochs. Thus, a world of shallow ocean, made turbulent by

wind and the moons; a world of many islands large and small, but no real continents. The Merseians had established themselves in the region they called the Kimraig Sea. They had spread their dromes widely across the surface, their bubblehouses over the bottom. And their aircraft ruled those skies. Not often did a recon flight, robot or piloted, come back to Highport with word of what was going on. Nor did instruments peering from spaceships as they came and went show much.

*One of these years, Abrams thought, somebody will break the tacit agreement and put up a few spy satellites. Why not us?— 'Course, then the other side'll bring space warships, instead of just transports, and go pot-shooting. And then the first side will bring bigger warships.*

"I am glad you called," Runei said. "I have thanked Admiral Enriques for the conversion unit, but pleasure is to express obligation to a friend."

"Huh?"

"You did not know? One of our main desalinators broke down. Your commandant was good enough to furnish us with a replacement part we lacked."

"Oh, yeh. That." Abrams rolled his cigar between his teeth.

The matter was ridiculous, he thought. Terrans and Merseians were at war on Starkad. They killed each other's people. But

nonetheless, Runei had sent a message of congratulations when Birthday rolled around. (Twice ridiculous! Even if a spaceship in hyperdrive has no theoretical limit to her pseudovelocity, the concept of simultaneity remains meaningless over interstellar distances.) And Enriques had now saved Runei from depleting his beer supplies.

Because this wasn't a war. Not officially. Not even among the two native races. Tigeries and Seatrolls had fought since they evolved to intelligence, probably. But that was like men and wolves in ancient days, nothing systematic, plain natural enemies. Until the Merseians began giving the Seatrolls equipment and advice and the landfolk were driven back. When Terra heard about that, it was sheer reflex to do likewise for the Tigeries, preserve the balance lest Starkad be unified as a Merseian puppet. As a result, the Merseians upped their help a bit, and Terrans replied in kind, and—

And the two empires remained at peace. These were simple missions of assistance, weren't they? Terra had Mount Narpa by treaty with the Tigeries of Ujanka, Merseia sat in Kimraig by treaty with whoever lived there. (Time out for laughter and applause. No Starkadian culture appeared to have anything like an idea of compacts between sovereign pow-

ers.) The Roidhunate of Merseia didn't shoot down Terran scouts. Heavens, no! Only Merseian militechicians did, helping the Seatrolls of Kimraig maintain inviolate their air space. The Terran Empire hadn't bushwhacked a Merseian landing party on Cape Thunder: merely Terrans pledged to guard the frontier of their ally.

The Covenant of Alfzar held. You were bound to assist civilized outworlders on request. Abrams toyed with the notion of inventing some requests from his side. In fact, that wasn't a bad gambit right now.

"Maybe you can return the favor," he said. "We've lost a flitter in the Zletovar. I'm not so rude as to hint that one of your lads was cruising along and eyeballed ours and got a wee bit overexcited. But supposing the crash was accidental, how about a joint investigation?"

Abrams liked seeing startlement on that hard green face. "You joke, Commander!"

"Oh, naturally my boss'd have to approach you officially, but I'll suggest it to him. You've got better facilities than us for finding a sunken wreck."

"But why?"

Abrams shrugged. "Mutual interest in preventing accidents. Cultivation of friendship between peoples and individual beings. I think that's what the catchword

is among diplomats back home."

Runei scowled. "Quite impossible. I advise you not to make any such proposal on the record."

"Nu? Wouldn't look so good if you turn us down?"

"Tension would only be increased. Must I repeat my government's position to you? The oceans of Starkad belong to the seafolk. They evolved there, it is their environment, it is not essential to the landfolk. Nevertheless the landfolk have consistently encroached. Their fisheries, their seabeast hunts, their weed harvests, their drag nets, everything disturbs an ecology vital to the other race. I will not speak of those they have killed, the underwater cities they have bombed with stones, the bays and straits they have barred. I will say that when Merseia offered her good offices to negotiate a *modus vivendi*, no land culture showed the slightest interest. My task is to help the seafolk resist aggression until the various landfolk societies agree to establish a just and stable peace."

"Come off that parrot act," Abrams snorted. "You haven't got the beak for it. Why are you really here?"

"I have told you —"

"No. Think. You've got your orders and you obey 'em like a good little soldier. But don't you sometimes wonder what the profit is for Merseia? I sure do.

What the black and red deuce is your government's reason? It's not as if Saxo sun had a decent strategic location. Here we are, spang in the middle of a hundred light-year strip of no man's land between our realms. Hardly been explored; hell, I'll bet half the stars around us aren't so much as noted in a catalogue. The nearest civilization is Betelgeuse, and the Betelgeuseans are neutrals who wish emerods on both our houses. You're too old to believe in elves, gnomes, little men, or the disinterested altruism of great empires. So *why?*"

"I may not question the decisions of the Roidhun and his Grand Council. Still less may you." Runei's stiffness dissolved in a grin. "If Starkad is so useless, why are you here?"

"Lot of people back home wonder about that too," Abrams admitted. "Policy says we contain you wherever we can. Sitting on this planet, you would have a base fifty light-years closer to our borders, for whatever that's worth." He paused. "Could give you a bit more influence over Betelgeuse."

"Let us hope your envoy manages to settle the dispute," Runei said, relaxing. "I do not precisely enjoy myself on this hellball either."

"What envoy?"

"You have not heard? Our latest courier informed us that

a...*khraich*...yes, a Lord Hauksberg is hitherbound."

"I know." Abrams winced. "Another big red wheel to roll around the base."

"But he is to proceed to Merseia. The Grand Council has agreed to receive him."

"Huh?" Abrams shook his head. "Damn, I wish our mails, were as good as yours. . . .Well. How about this downed flitter? Why won't you help us look for the pieces?"

"In essence, informally," Runei said, "because we hold it had no right, as a foreign naval vessel, to fly over the waters. Any consequences must be on the pilot's own head."

*Ho-ho!* Abrams tautened. That was something new. Implied, of course, by the Merseian position; but this was the first time he had heard the claim in plain language. So could the greenskins be preparing a major push? Very possible, especially if Terra had offered to negotiate. Military operations exert pressure at bargaining tables, too.

Runei sat like a crocodile, smiling the least amount. Had he guessed what was in Abrams' mind? Maybe not. In spite of what the brotherhood-of-beings sentimentalists kept bleating, Merseians did not really think in human style. Abrams made an elaborate stretch and yawn. "Bout time I knocked off," he said.

"Nice talking to you, old bastard," He did not entirely lie. Runei was a pretty decent carnivore. Abrams would have loved to hear him reminisce about the planets where he had ranged.

"Your move," the Merseian reminded him.

"Why. . .yes. Clean forgot. Knight to king's bishop four."

Runei got out his own board and shifted the piece. Hesat quiet a while, studying. "Curious," he murmured.

"It'll get curiouser. Call me back when you're ready." Abrams switched off.

His cigar was dead again. He dropped the stub down the disposal, lit a fresh one, and rose. Weariness dragged at him. Gravity on Starkad wasn't high enough that men needed drugs or a counterfield. But one-point-three gees meant twenty-five extra kilos loaded on middle-aged bones... No, he was thinking in standard terms. Dayan pulled ten percent harder than Terra. . .Dayan, dear gaunt hills and wind-scoured plains, homes nestled in warm orange sunlight, low trees and salt marshes and the pride of a people who had bent desolation to their needs... Where had young Flandry been from, and what memories did he carry to darkness?

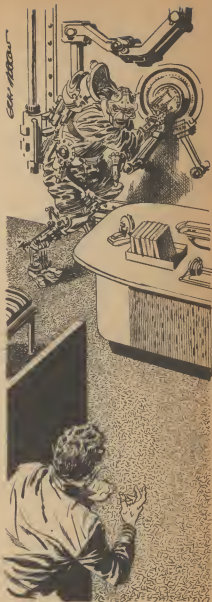
On a sudden impulse Abrams put down his cigar, bent his head, and inwardly recited the Kaddish.

*Get to bed, old man. Maybe you've stumbled on a clue, maybe not, but it'll keep. Go to your rest.*

He put on cap and cloak, thrust the cigar back between his jaws, and walked out.

Cold smote him. A breeze blew thinly under strange constellations and auroral flimmer. The nearer moon, Egrima, was up, almost full, twice the apparent size of Luna seen from Terra. It flooded distant snowpeaks with icy bluish light. Buruz was a Luna-sized crescent barely above the rooftops.

Walls bulked black on either side of the unpaved street, which scrunched with frost as his boots struck. Here and there glowed a lighted window, but they and the scattered lamps did little to relieve the murk. On his left, unrestful radiance from smelters picked out the two spaceships now in port, steel cenotaphs rearing athwart the Milky Way. Thence, too, came the clangor of night-shift work. The field was being enlarged, new sheds and barracks were going up, for Terra's commitment was growing. On his right the sky was tinted by feverish glowsigns, and he caught snatches of drumbeat, trumpets, perhaps laughter. Madame Cepheid had patriotically dispatched a shipful of girls and croupiers to Starkad. And why not? They



were so young and lonely, those boys.

*Marta, I miss you.*

Abrams was almost at his quarters when he remembered he hadn't stashed the papers on his desk. He stopped dead. Great Emperor's elegant epiglottis! He was indeed due for an overhaul.

Briefly he was tempted to say, "Urrinate on regulations." The office was built of ferroconcrete, with an armorplate door and an automatic recognition lock. But no. Lieutenant Novak might report for duty before his chief, may his pink cheeks fry in hell. Wouldn't do to set a bad security example. Not that espionage was any problem here, but what a man didn't see, he couldn't tell if the Merseians caught and hypnoprobed him.

Abrams wheeled and strode back, trailing bad words. At the end, he slammed to a halt. His cigar hit the deck and he ground down a heel on it.

The door was properly closed, the windows dark. But he could see footprints in the churned, not yet congealed mud before the entrance, and they weren't his own.

And no alarm had gone off. Somebody was inside with a truckload of roboticist's gear.

Abrams' blaster snaked into his hand. Call the guard on his wristcom? No, whoever could burgle his office could surely detect a

transmission and was surely prepared for escape before help could arrive. By suicide if nothing else.

Abrams adjusted his gun to needle beam. Given luck, he might disable rather than kill. Unless he bought it first. The heart slugged in his breast. Night closed thickly inward.

He catfooted to the door and touched the lock switch. Metal burned his fingers with chill. Identified, he swung the door open and leaned around the edge.

Light trickled over his shoulder and through the windows. A thing whirled from his safe. His eyes were adapted and he made out some details. It must have looked like any workman in radiation armor as it passed through the base. But now one arm had sprouted tools; and the helmet was thrown back to reveal a face with electronic eyes, set in a head of alloy.

A Merseian face.

Blue lightning spat from the tool-hand. Abrams had yanked himself back. The energy bolt sparked and sizzled on the door. He spun his own blaster to medium beam, not stopping to give himself reasons, and snapped a shot.

The other weapon went dead, ruined. The armored shape used its normal hand to snatch for a gun taken forth in advance and laid on top of the safe. Abrams charged through the doorway

while he reset for needle fire. So intense a ray, at such close range, slashed legs across. In a rattle and clash, the intruder fell.

Abrams activated his transmitter. "Guard! Intelligence office—on the double!"

His blaster threatened while he waved the lights to go on. The being stirred. No blood flowed from those limb stumps; power-packs, piezoelectric cascades, room-temperature superconductors lay revealed. Abrams realized what he had caught, and whistled. Less than half a Merseian: no tail, no breast or lower body, not much natural skull, one arm and the fragment of another. The rest was machinery. It was the best prosthetic job he'd ever heard of.

Not that he knew of many. Only among races which didn't know how to make tissues regenerate, or which didn't have that kind of tissues. Surely the Merseians—But what a lovely all-purpose plug-in they had here!

The green face writhed. Wrath and anguish spewed from the lips. The hand fumbled at the chest. To turn off the heart? Abrams kicked that wrist aside and planted a foot on it. "Easy, friend," he said.

## Chapter II

Ensign Dominic Flandry, Im-

perial Naval Flight Corps, did not know whether he was alive through luck or management. At the age of nineteen, with the encoding molecules hardly settled down on your commission, it was natural to think the latter. But had a single one of the factors he had used to save himself been absent—He didn't care to dwell on that.

Besides, his troubles were far from over. As a merchant ship belonging to the Sisterhood of Kursoviki, the *Archer* had been given a radio by the helpful Terrans. But it was crapout; some thumblewit had exercised some Iron age notion of maintenance. Dragoika had agreed to put back for her home. But with a foul wind, they'd be days at sea in this damned wallowing bathtub before they were even likely to speak a boat with a transmitter in working order. That wasn't fatal per se. Flandry could shove local rations through the chow-lock of his helmet; Starkadian biochemistry was sufficiently like Terran that most foods wouldn't poison him, and he carried vitamin supplements. The taste, though, my God, the taste!

Most ominous was the fact that he *had* been shot down, and at no large distance from here. Perhaps the Seatrolls, and Merseians, would let this Tigery craft alone. If they weren't yet ready to show their hand, they probably would.

However, his misfortune indicated their preparations were more or less complete. When he chanced to pass above their latest kettle of mischief, they'd felt so confident they opened fire.

"And then the Outside Folk attacked you?" Ferok prodded. His voice came as a purr through whistle of wind, rush and smack of waves, creak of rigging, all intensified and distorted by the thick air.

"Yes," Flandry said. He groped for words. They'd given him an electronic cram in the language and customs of Kursovikian civilization while the transport bore him from Terra. But some things are hard to explain in pre-industrial terms. "A type of vessel which can both submerge and fly rose from the water. Its radio shout drowned my call and its firebeams wrecked my craft before mine could pierce its thicker armor. I barely escaped my hull as it sank, and kept submerged until the enemy went away. Then I flew off in search of help. The small engine which lifted me was nigh exhausted when I came upon your ship."

Truly his gravity impeller wouldn't lug him much further until the capacitors were recharged. He didn't plan to use it again. What power remained in the pack on his shoulders must be saved to operate the pump and reduction valve in the vitryl globe

which sealed off his head. A man couldn't breathe Starkadian sea-level air and survive. Such an oxygen concentration would burn out his lungs faster than nitrogen narcosis and carbon dioxide acidosis could kill him.

He remembered how Lieutenant Danielson had gigged him for leaving off the helmet. "Ensign, I don't give a ball of fertilizer how uncomfortable the thing is, when you might be enjoying your nice Terra-conditioned cockpit. Nor do I weep at the invasion of privacy involved in taping your every action in flight. The purpose is to make sure that pups like you, who know so much more than a thousand years of astronautics could possibly teach them, obey regulations. The next offense will earn you thirty seconds of nerve-lash. Dismissed."

*So you saved my life, Flandry grumbled. You're still a snott-nosed bastard.*

Nobody was to blame for his absent blaster. It was torn from the holster in those wild seconds of scrambling clear. He had kept the regulation knife and pouchful of oddments. He had boots and gray coverall, sadly stained and in no case to be compared with the glamorous dress uniform. And that was just about the lot.

Ferok lowered the plumy thermosensor tendrils above his eyes: a frown. "If the vaz-Siravo search what's left of your flier, down



below, and don't find your body, they may guess what you did and come looking for you," he said.

"Yes," Flandry agreed, "they may."

He braced himself against pitch and roll and looked outward—tall, the lankiness of adolescence still with him; brown hair, gray eyes, a rather long and regular face which Saxo had burned dark. Before him danced and shimmered a greenish ocean, sun-flecks and whitecaps on waves that marched faster, in Starkadian gravity, than on Terra. The sky was pale blue. Clouds banked gigantic on the horizon, but in a dense atmosphere they did not portend storm. A winged thing cruised, a sea animal broached and dove again. At its distance, Saxo was only a third as broad as Sol is to Terra and gave half the illumination. The adaptable human vision perceived this as normal, but the sun was merciless white, so brilliant that one dared not look anywhere near. The short day stood at late afternoon, and the temperature, never very high in these middle northern latitudes, was dropping. Flandry shivered.

Ferok made a contrast to him. The land Starkadian, Tigery, Toborko, or whatever you wanted to call him, was built not unlike a short man with disproportionately long legs. His hands were four-fingered, his feet large and

clawed, he flaunted a stubby tail. The head was less anthropoid, round, with flat face tapering to a narrow chin. The eyes were big, slanted, scarlet in the iris, beneath his fronded tendrils. The nose, what there was of it, had a single slit nostril. The mouth was wide and carnivore-toothed. The ears were likewise big, outer edges elaborated till they almost resembled bat wings. Sleek fur covered his skin, black-striped orange that shaded into white at the throat.

He wore only a beaded pouch, kept from flapping by thigh straps, and a curved sword, scabbarded across his back. By profession he was the boatswain, a high rank for a male on a Kursovian ship; as such, he was no doubt among Dragoika's lovers. By nature he was impetuous, quarrelsome, and dog-loyal to his allegiances. Flandry liked him.

Ferok lifted a telescope and swept it around an arc. That was a native invention. Kursoviki was the center of the planet's most advanced culture. "No sign of anything yet," he said. "Do you think yon Outsider flyboat may attack us?"

"I doubt that," Flandry said. "Most likely it was simply on hand because of having brought some Mersian advisors, and shot at me because I might be carrying instruments which would give me a clue as to what's going on down below. It's probably re-

turned to Kimraig by now." He hesitated before continuing: "The Merseians, like us, seldom take a direct role in any action, and then nearly always just as individual officers, not representatives of their people. Neither of us wishes to provoke a response in kind."

"Afraid?" Lips curled back from fangs.

"On your account," Flandry said, somewhat honestly. "You have no dream of what our weapons can do to a world."

"World...hunh, the thought's hard to seize. Well, let the Sisterhood try. I'm happy to be a plain male."

Flandry turned and looked across the deck. The *Archer* was a big ship by Starkadian measure, perhaps five hundred tons, broad in the beam, high in the stern, a carven post at the prow as emblem of her tutelary spirit. A deckhouse stood amidships, holding galley, smithy, carpenter shop, and armory. Everything was gaudily painted. Three masts carried yellow square sails aloft, fore-and-aft beneath; at the moment she was tacking on the latter and a genoa. The crew were about their duties on deck and in the rigging. They numbered thirty male hands and half a dozen female officers. The ship had been carrying timber and spices from Ujanka port down the Chain archipelago.

"What armament have we?" he asked.

"Our Terran deck gun," Ferok told him. "Five of your rifles. We were offered more, but Dragoika said they'd be no use till we had more people skilled with them. Otherwise, swords, pikes, crossbows, knives, belaying pins, teeth and nails." He gestured at the mesh which passed from side to side of the hull, under the keel. "If that twitches much, could mean a Siravo trying to put a hole in our bottom. Then we dive after him. You'd be best for that, with your gear."

Flandry winced. His helmet was adjustable for underwater; on Starkad, the concentration of dissolved oxygen was almost as high as in Terra's air. But he didn't fancy a scrap with a being evolved for such an environment.

"Why are you here, yourself?" Ferok asked conversationally. "Pleasure or plunder?"

"Neither. I was sent." Flandry didn't add that the Navy reckoned it might as well use Starkad to give certain promising young officers some experience. "Promising" made him sound too immature. At once he realized he'd actually sounded unaggressive and prevaricated in haste: "Of course, with the chance of getting into a fight. I would have asked to go anyway."

"They tell me your females obey males. True?"

"Well, sometimes." The second mate passed by and Flandry's

gaze followed her. She had curves, a tawny mane rippling down her back, breasts standing fuller and firmer than any girl could have managed without technological assistance, and a nearly humanoid nose. Her clothing consisted of some gold bracelets. But her differences from the Terran went deeper than looks. She didn't lactate; those nipples fed blood directly to her infants. And hers was the more imaginative, more cerebral sex, not subordinated in any culture, dominant in the islands around Kursoviki. He wondered if that might trace back to something as simple as the female body holding more blood and more capacity to regenerate it.

"But who, then, keeps order in your home country?" Ferok wondered. "Why haven't you killed each other off?"

"Um-m-m, hard to explain," Flandry said. "Let me first see if I understand your ways, to compare mine. For instance, you owe nothing to the place where you live, right? I mean, no town or island or whatever is ruled, as a ship is...right? Instead—at any rate in this part of the world—the females are organized into associations like the Sisterhood, whose members may live anywhere, which even have their special languages. They own all important property and make all important decisions through

those associations. Thus disputes among males have little effect on them. Am I right?"

"I suppose so. You might have put it more politely."

"Apology-of-courage is offered. I am a stranger. Now among my people—"

A shout fell from the crow's nest. Ferok whirled and pointed his telescope. The crew sprang to the starboard rail, clustered in the shrouds, and yelled.

Dragoika bounded from the captain's cabin under the poop. She held a four-pronged fish spear in one hand, a small painted drum beneath her arm. Up the ladder she went, to stand by the quartermistress at the wheel and look for herself. Then, coolly, she tapped her drum on one side, plucked the steel strings across the recessed head on the other. Twang and thump carried across noise like a bugle call. *All hands to arms and battle stations!*

"The vaz-Siravo!" Ferok shouted above the clamor. "They're on us!" He made for the deckhouse. Restored to discipline, the crew were lining up for helmets, shields, byrnies, and weapons.

Flandry strained his eyes into the glare off the water. A score or so blue dorsal fins clove it, converging on the ship. And suddenly, a hundred meters to starboard, a submarine rose.

A little, crude thing, doubtless home built to a Merseian design

—for if you want to engineer a planet-wide war among primitives, you should teach them what they can make and do for themselves. The hull was greased leather stretched across a framework of some undersea equivalent of wood. Harness trailed downward to the four fish which pulled it; he could barely discern them as huge shadows under the surface. The deck lay awash. But an outsize catapult projected therefrom. Several dolphin-like bodies with transparent globes on their heads and powerpacks on their backs crouched alongside. They rose onto flukes and flippers; their arms reached to swing the machine around.

"Dommaneeek!" Dragoika screeched. "Dommaneeek Falandaree! Can you man ours?"

"Aye, aye!" The Terran ran prow-ward. Planks rolled and thudded beneath his feet,

On the forward deck, the two females whose duty it was were trying to unlimber the gun. They worked slowly, getting in each other's way, spitting curses. There hadn't yet been time to drill many competent shots, even with a weapon as simple as this, a rifle throwing 38 mm. chemical shells. Before they got the range, that catapult might—

"Gangway!" Flandry shoved the nearest aside. She snarled and swatted at him with long red nails. Dragoika's drum rippled an order.

Both females fell back from him.

He opened the breech, grabbed a shell from the ammo box, and dogged it in. The enemy catapult thumped. A packet arced high, down again, made a near miss and burst into flame which spread crimson and smoky across the waves. Some version of Greek fire—undersea oil wells—Flandry put his eye to the range finder. He was too excited to be scared. But he must lay the gun manually. A hydraulic system would have been too liable to breakdown. In spite of good balance and self-lubricating bearings, the barrel swung with nightmare slowness. The Seatrolls were rewinding their catapult...before Andromeda, they were fast! *They* must use hydraulics.

Dragoika spoke to the quartermistress. She put the wheel hard over. Booms swung over the deck. The jib flapped thunderous until crewmales reset the sheets. The *Archer* came about. Flandry struggled to compensate. He barely remembered to keep one foot on the brake, lest his gun travel too far. *But those she-cats would've forgotten.* The enemy missile didn't make the vessel's supestructure as intended. But it struck the hull amidships. Under this oxygen pressure, fire bilged heavenward.

Flandry pulled the lanyard. His gun roared and kicked. A geyser fountained, mingled with splin-

ters. One draught fish leaped, threshed, and died. The rest already floated bellies up. "Got him!" Flandry whooped.

Dragoika plucked a command. Most of the crew put aside their weapons and joined a firefighting party. There was a hand pump at either rail, buckets with ropes bent to them, sails to drag from the deckhouse and wet and lower.

Ferok, or someone, yelled through voices, wind, waves, brawling and smoke of the flames. The Seatrolls were coming over the opposite rail.

They must have climbed the nets. (*Better invent a different warning gadget*, raced through Flandry's mind.) They wore the Merseian equipment which had enabled their kind to carry the war ashore elsewhere on Starkad. Waterfilled helmets covered the blunt heads, black absorbent skinsuits kept everything else moist. Pumps cycled atmospheric oxygen, running off powerpacks. The same capacitors energized their legs. Those were clumsy. The bodies must be harnessed into a supporting framework, the two flippers and the fluked tail controlled four mechanical limbs with prehensile feet. But they lurched across the deck, huge, powerful, their hands holding spears and axes and a couple of waterproof machine pistols. Ten of them were now aboard. . . and how many sailors could be

spared from the fire?

A rifle bullet wailed. A Seatroll sprayed lead in return. Tigeries crumpled. Their blood was human color.

Flandry rammed home another shell and lobbed it into the sea some distance off. "Why?" screamed a gunner.

"May have been more coming," he said. "I hope hydrostatic shock got 'em." He didn't notice he used Anglic.

Dragoika cast her fish spear. One pistol wielder went down, the prongs in him. He scrambled at the shaft. Rifles barked, crossbows snapped, driving his mate to shelter between the deckhouse and a lifeboat. Then combat ramped, leaping Tigeries, lumbering Seatrolls, sword against ax, pike against spear, clash, clatter, grunt, shriek, chaos run loose. Several firefighters went for their weapons. Dragoika drummed them back to work. The Seatrolls made for them, to cut them down and let the ship burn. The armed Tigeries tried to defend them. The enemy pistoleer kept the Kursovikina rifle shooters pinned down behind masts and bollards—neutralized. The battle had no more shape than that.

A bullet splintered the planks a meter from Flandry. For a moment, panic locked him where he stood. What to do, what to do? He couldn't die. He mustn't. He was Dominic Flandry, with a life-

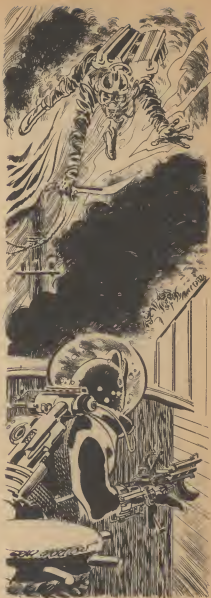
time yet to live. Outnumbered though they were, the Seatrolls need but wreak havoc till the fire got beyond control and he was done. *Mother! Help me!*

For no sound reason, he remembered Lieutenant Davidson. Rage blossomed in him. He bounded down the ladder and across the main deck. A Seatroll chopped at him. He swerved and continued.

Dragoika's door stood under the poop. He slid the panel aside and plunged into her cabin. It was appointed in barbaric luxury. Sunlight sickled through an oval port, across the bulkhead as the ship rolled, touching bronze candlesticks, woven tapestry, a primitive sextant, charts and navigation tables inscribed on parchment. He snatched what he had left here to satisfy her curiosity, his impeller, buckled the unit on his back with frantic fingers and hooked in his capacitors. Now, that sword, which she hadn't taken time to don. He re-emerged, flicked controls, and rose.

Over the deckhouse! The Seatroll with the machine pistol lay next to it, a hard target for a rifle, himself commanding stem and stern. Flandry drew blade. The being heard the slight noise and tried awkwardly to look up. Flandry struck. He missed the hand but knocked the gun loose. It flipped over the side.

He whirled aft, smiting from above. "I've got him!" he



shouted. "I've got him! Come out and do some real shooting!"

The fight was soon finished. He used a little more energy to help spread the wet sail which smothered the fire.

After dark, Egrima and Buruz again ruled heaven. They cast shivering glades across the waters. Few stars shone through, but one didn't miss them with so much other beauty. The ship plowed northward in an enormous murmurous hush.

Dragoika stood with Flandry by the totem at the prow. She had offered thanks. Kursovian religion was a paganism more inchoate than any recorded from ancient Terra—the Tigery mind was less interested than the human in finding ultimate causes—but ritual was important. Now the crew had returned to watch or sleep and they two were alone. Her fur was sparked with silver, her eyes pools of light.

"Our thanks belong more to you," she said softly. "I am high in the Sisterhood. They will be told, and remember."

"Oh, well." Flandry shuffled his feet and blushed. "But have you not endangered yourself? You explained what scant strength is left in those boxes which you keep alive. And then you spent it to fly about."

"Uh, my pump can be operated manually if need be."

"I shall appoint a detail."

"No need. You see, now I can use the Siravo powerpacks. I have tools in my pouch for adapting them."

"Good." She looked awhile into the shadows and luminance which barred the deck. Then, leaning against him: "I've met vaz-Terran before, but you are the first I have really known well." Her tail wagged. "I like you."

Flandry gulped. "I, I like you too."

"You fight like a male and think like a female. That's something new. Even in the far southern islands—" She laid an arm around his waist. Her fur was warm and silken where it touched his skin. Somebody had told him once that could you breathe their air undiluted, the Tigeries would smell like new-mown hay. "I'll have joy of your company."

"Um-m-m...uh." *What can I say?*

"Pity you must wear that helmet," Dragoika said. "I'd like to taste your lips. But otherwise we're not made so differently, our two kinds. Will you come to my cabin?"

For an instant that whirled, Flandry was tempted. He had everything he could do to answer. It wasn't based on past lectures about taking care not to offend native mores, nor on principle, nor, most certainly, on fastidiousness. If anything, her otherness

made her the more piquant. But he really couldn't predict what she might do in a close relationship, and—

"I'm deeply sorry," he said. "I'd love to, but I'm under a —" what was the word?—"a geas."

She was neither offended nor much surprised. She had seen a lot of different cultures. "Pity," she said. "Well, you know where the forecandle is. Goodnight." She padded aft. En route, she stopped to collect Ferok.

—and besides, those fangs were awfully intimidating.

### Chapter III

When Lord Hauksberg arrived in Highport, Admiral Enriques and super-echelon staff had given a formal welcoming party for their distinguished visitor and his aides as protocol required. Hauksberg was expected to reciprocate on the eve of departure. Those affairs were predictably dull. In between, however, he invited various officers to small gatherings, one of them young Ensign Dominic Flandry, hero, recently returned from Ujanka.

"I still don't see how you rate," Jan van Zuyl complained from the bunk where he sprawled. "A lousy ensign like you."

"You're an ensign yourself, me boy," Flandry reminded him from the dresser. He gave his blue tunic a final tug, pulled on his

white gloves, and buffed the jet-flare insignia on his shoulders.

"Yes, but not a lousy one," said his roommate.

"I'm a hero. Remember?"

"I'm a hero too. We're all heroes." Van Zuyl's gaze prowled their dismal little chamber. The girlie animations hardly brightened it. "Give L'Etoile a kiss for me."

"You mean she'll be there?" Flandry's pulses jumped.

"She was when Carruthers got invited. Her and Sharine and—"

"Carruthers is a lieutenant j.g. Therefore he is ex officio a liar. Madame Cepheid's choicest items are not available to anyone below commander."

"He swears milord had 'em on hand, and in hand, for the occasion. So he lies. Do me a favor and elaborate the fantasy on your return. I'd like to keep that particular illusion."

"You provide the whisky and I'll provide the tales." Flandry adjusted his cap to micrometrically calculated rakishness.

"Mercenary wretch," van Zuyl groaned. "Anyone else would lie for pleasure and prestige."

"Know, O miserable one, that I possess an inward serenity which elevates me far beyond any need for your esteem. Yet not beyond need for your booze. Especially after the last poker game, And a magnificent evening to you. I shall return."



Flandry proceeded down the hall and out the main door of the junior officers' dorm. Wind struck viciously at him. Sea-level air didn't move fast, being too dense, but on this mountaintop Saxo could energize storms of more than terrestroid ferocity. Dry snow hissed through chill and clamor. Flandry wrapped his cloak about him with a sigh for lost appearances, hung onto his cap, and ran. At his age he had soon adapted to the gravity.

Outside HQ a scanner checked Flandry and opened the door. The lobby beyond was warm! It was also full of armed guards. They saluted and let him by with envious glances. But as he went up the gravshaft, his self-confidence grew thinner. Rather than making him bouncy, the graduated shift to Terran weight gave a sense of unfirmness.

Announced by a liveried servant, he stepped into a suite of iridescent walls, comfortable loungers, an animation showing a low-gee production of *Ondine*. Behind a buffet table poised another couple of servants, and three more circulated. A dozen men stood conversing: officers of the mission in dress uniform, Hauksberg's staff in colorful mufti. Only one girl was present. Flandry was a little too nervous for disappointment. It was a relief to see Abrams' square figure, especially

since he had gotten to know the Intelligence chief pretty well in the debriefings that followed his experience with the Tigeries.

"Ah. Our gallant ensign, eh?" A yellow-haired man set down his glass—a waiter with a tray was there before he had completed the motion—and sauntered forth. His garments were conservatively purple and gray, but they fitted like another skin and showed him to be in better physical shape than most nobles. "Welcome. Hauksberg."

Flandry saluted. "My lord."

"At ease, at ease." Hauksberg made a negligent gesture. "no rank or ceremony tonight. Hate 'em, really." He took Flandry's elbow. "C'mon and be introduced."

The boy's superiors greeted him with more interest than hitherto. They were men who Starkad had darkened and leaned; honors sat burnished on their tunics; they could be seen to resent how patronizingly the Terran staffers addressed one of their own. "—and my concubine, the right honorable Persis d'Io."

"I am privileged to meet you, Ensign," she said as if she meant it.

Flandry decided she was an adequate substitute for L'Etoile, at least in ornamental function. She was equipped almost as sumptuously as Dragoika, and her shimmerite gown emphasized the

fact. Otherwise she wore a fire ruby at her throat and a tiara on high-piled crow's-wing tresses. Her features were either her own or shaped by an imaginative biosculptor: big green eyes, delicately arched nose, generous mouth, uncommon vivacity. "Please get yourself a drink and a smoke," she said. "You'll need a soothed larynx. I intend to make you talk a lot."

"Uh...um—" Flandry barely stopped his toes from digging in the carpet. The hand he closed on a proffered wine glass was damp. "Little to talk about, Donna. Lots of men have, uh, had more exciting things happen to them."

"Hardly so romantic, though," Hauksberg said. "Sailin' with a pirate crew, et cet'ra."

"They're not pirates, my lord," Flandry blurted. "Merchants... Pardon me."

Hauksberg studied him. "You like 'em, eh?"

"Yes, sir," Flandry said. "Very much." He weighed his words, but they were honest. "Before I got to know the Tigeries well, my mission here was only a duty. Now I *want* to help them."

Commendable. Still the seaw dwellers are also sentient bein's, what? And the Merseians, for that matter. Pity everyone's at loggerheads."

Flandry's ears burned. Abrams spoke what he dared not: "My

lord, those fellow beings of the ensign's did their level best to kill him."

"And in retaliation, after he reported, an attack was made on a squadron of theirs," Hauksberg said sharply. "Three Merseians were killed, plus a human. I was bein' received by Commandent Runei at the time. Embarrassin'."

"I don't doubt the Fodaich stayed elegant courteous to the Emperor's representative," Abrams said. "He's a charming scoundrel when he cares to be. But my lord, we have an authorized, announced policy of paying back any attacks on our mission." His tone grew sardonic. "It's a peaceful, advisory mission, in a territory claimed by neither empire. So it's entitled to protection. Which means that bushwacking its personnel has got to be made expensive."

"And if Runei ordered a return raid?" Hauksberg challenged.

He didn't, my lord."

"Not yet. Bit of evidence for Merseia's conciliatory attitude, what? Or could be my presence influenced Runei. One day soon, though, if these skirmishes continue, a real escalation will set in. Then everybody'll have the devil's personal job controllin' the degree of escalation. Might fail. The time to stop was yesterday."

"Seems to me Merseia's escalated quite a big hunk, starting operations this near main base."

"The seafolk have done so. They had Merseian help, no doubt, but it's their war and the landfolk's. No one else's."

Abrams savaged a cold cigar.

"My lord," he growled, "seafolk and landfolk alike are divided into thousands of communities, scores of civilizations. Many never heard of each other before. The dwellers in the Zletover were nothing but a nuisance to the Kursovikians, till now. So who gave them the idea of mounting a concerted attack? Who's gradually changing what was a stable situation into a planet-wide war of race against race? Merseia!"

"No arguments, please, gentlemen," Persis interrupted smoothly. "I'm too anxious to hear Ensign Flandry."

"Of course, of course, my dear," Hauksberg changed tone just as smoothly. "Well, young man, let's hear exactly what happened when you were picked up"—he lit a cheroot—"by these, ah, merchants."

They took loungers. Flandry received a goldleaf-tipped cigaret from Persis' own fingers. Wine and excitement bubbled in him. He made the tale somewhat better than true: sufficient to drive Abrams into a coughing fit.

"—and so, when we reached Ujanka, I put through a call to our station in the High Hous-

ing. After that, a flier got me out in no time."

Persis sighed. "You make it sound such fun. Have you seen your friends again since?"

"Not yet, Donna. I've been too busy working with Commander Abrams." In point of fact, he had done the detail chores of data correlation on a considerably lower level. "I've been temporarily assigned to his section. I do have an invitation to visit down in Ujanka, and imagine I'll be ordered to accept."

"Right," Captain Menotti said. "One of our problems has been that, while the Sisterhood accepts our equipment and some of our advice, they've remained wary of us. Understandable, when we're so foreign to them, and when their own Seatroll neighbors were never a real menace. We've achieved better liaison with less developed Starkadian cultures. Kursoviki is too proud, too jealous of its privacies, I might say too sophisticated, to take us as seriously as we'd like. Here we may have an entering wedge."

"And for something still more important than that, Captain," Hauksberg said thoughtfully.

"Oh? And what would that be ...my lord?"

"Peace, Captain," He paused to let the word sink in. Then, "It's not unthinkable, y' know, p'rhaps we can head off this

latest local war. Negotiate a peace between the Kursovikians and their neighbors."

"What?" Abrams barked. "Impossible!"

Hauksberg shrugged slightly. "Maybe so, Commander, but it's worth a try, wouldn't you say?" Then, before Abrams could reply, he smiled broadly, waving them all to the next room. "But, gentlemen, this is s'posed to be a social evenin'. Forget business and have another drink or ten, eh?"

His gossip from Terra was scandalous and comical. "Darling," Persis said, "you mustn't cynicize our guest of honor. Let's go talk more politely, Ensign."

"W-w-with joy, Donna."

The suite was interior, but a viewscreen gave on the scene outside. Snowfall had stopped; mountaintops lay gaunt and white beneath the moons. Persis shivered. "What a dreadful place. I pray we can bring you home soon."

He was emboldened to say, "I never expected a, uh, highborn and, uh, lovely lady to come this long, dull, dangerous way."

She laughed. "I highborn? But thanks. You're sweet." Her lashes fluttered. "If I can help my lord by traveling with him...how could I refuse? He's working for Terra. So are you. So should I. All of us together, wouldn't that be best?" She laughed again. "I'm

sorry to be the only girl here. Would your officers mind if we danced a little?"

He went back to quarters with his head afloat. Nonetheless, next day he gave Jan van Zuyl a good bottle's worth.

\* \* \*

Later the next day Abrams leaned back, put one foot on his battered desk, and drew hard on his cigar. "So you really liked it down there in Ujanka?"

"Well, sir, it's true I wasn't there very long," Flandry said from the edge of his chair. "But I mean, well, besides helping the Kursovikians"—he was thinking primarily of Dragoika—"I felt I was accomplishing something. Information—friendship—"His voice trailed off.

"Modest young chap, aren't you?" Abrams blew a smoke ring. "Oh, sure, I see your point. Not a bad one. But never mind that now. You might, though, ask what I have in mind for you."

"Sir?"

"Lord Hauksberg is continuing to Merseia in another couple days. I'm going along in an advisory capacity, my orders claim. I rate an aide. I can also get you out of the Ujanka trip—for now. Want the job?"

Flandry goggled. His heart somersaulted. After a minute he noticed that his mouth hung open.

"Plain to see," Abrams continued, "my hope is to collect some

intelligence. Nothing melodramatic; I hope I'm more competent than that. I'll keep my eyes and ears open. Nose, too. But none of our diplomats, attaches, trade-talk representatives, none of our sources has ever been very helpful. Merseia's too distant from Terra. Almost the only contact has been on the level of brute, chip-on-your-shoulder power. This may be a chance to circulate under fewer restrictions.

"So I ought to bring an experienced, proven man. But we can't spare one. You've shown yourself pretty tough and resourceful for a youngster. A bit of practical experience in Intelligence will give you a mighty long leg up, if you ever decide to transfer. From your standpoint, you get off this miserable planet, travel in a luxury ship, see exotic Merseia, maybe other spots as well, probably get taken back to Terra and then probably not reassigned to Starkad even if you remain a flyboy—and make some highly useable contacts. How about it?"

"Y-y-yes, *sir!*" Flandry stammered.

Abrams' eyes crinkled. "Don't get above yourself, son. This won't be any pleasure cruise. I'll expect you to forget about sleep and live on stimpills from now till departure, learning what an aide of mine has to know. You'll be saddled with everything

from secretarial chores to keeping my uniforms neat. En route, you'll take an electrogram in the Eriau language and as much Merseiology as your brain'll hold without exploding. I need hardly warn you that's no carnival. Once we're there, if you're lucky you'll grind through a drab list of duties. If you're unlucky—if things should go nova—you won't be a plumed knight of the skies any longer, you'll be a hunted animal, and if they take you alive their style of quizzing won't leave you any personality worth having. Think about that."

Flandry didn't. His one regret was that he'd likely never see Dragoika again, and it was a passing twinge. "Sir," he declaimed, "you've got yourself an aide."

\* \* \*

"Has the Fodaich not seen the report I filed?" asked Dwyr the Hook.

"Yes, of course," Runei answered. "But I want to inquire about certain details. Having gotten into the Terran base, even though your objective was too well guarded to burgle, why did you not wait for an opportunity?"

"The likelihood did not appear great, Fodaich. And dawn was coming. Someone might have addressed me, and my reply might have provoked suspicion. My orders were to avoid unnecessary risks. The decision to leave at

once is justified in retrospect, since I did not find my vehicle in the canyon when I returned. A Terran patrol must have come upon it. Thus I had to travel overland to our hidden depot, and hence my delay in returning here."

"What about that other patrol you encountered on the way? How much did they see?"

"Very little, I believe, Fodaich. We were in thick forest, and they shot blindly when I failed to answer their challenge. They did, as you know, inflict considerable damage on me, and it is fortunate that I was then so close to my goal that I could crawl the rest of the way after escaping them."

"*Khr-r-r*," Runei sighed. "Well the attempt was worth making. But this seems to make you super-numerary on Starkad, doesn't it?"

"I trust I may continue to serve in honor," Dwyr gathered nerve. "Fodaich I did observe one thing from afar while in Highport, which may or may not be significant. Abrams himself walked downstreet in close conversation with a civilian who had several attendants— I suspect the delegate from Terra."

"Who is most wonderfully officious," Runei mused, "and who is proceeding on from here. Did you catch anything of what was said?"

"The noise level was high, Fod-

aich. With the help of aural amplification and focusing, I could identify a few words like 'Merseia.' My impression is that Abrams may be going with him. In such case, Abrams had better be kept under special watch."

"Yes," Runei stroked his chin. "A possibility. I shall consider it. Hold yourself in readiness for a quick departure."

Dwyr saluted and left. Runei sat alone. The whirr of ventilators filled his lair. Presently he nodded to himself, got out his chessboard, and pondered his next move. A smile touched his lips.

## Chapter IV

Ardaig, the original capital of Merseia had grown to surround that bay where the River Oiss poured into the Wilwidh Ocean; and its hinterland was now megapolis eastward to the Hun foothills. Nonetheless it retained a flavor of antiquity. Its citizens were more tradition-minded, ceremonious, leisurely than most. It was the cultural and artistic center of Merseia. Though the Grand Council still met here annually, and Castle Afon was still the Roidhun's official primary residence, the bulk of government business was transacted in antipodal Tridaig. The co-capital was young, technology-oriented, brawling with traffic and life,

seething with schemes and occasional violence. Hence there had been surprise when Brechdan Ironrede the Hand-of the Vach Ynvory, wanted the new Navy offices built in Ardaig.

He did not encounter much opposition. Not only did he preside over the Grand Council; in the space service he had attained fleet admiral's rank before succeeding to Handship of the Vach Ynvory, and the Navy remained his special love and expertise. Characteristically, he had offered little justification for his choice. This was his will; therefore let it be done.

And thus the tower arose, tier upon gleaming tier until at dawn its shadow engulfed Afon. Aircraft swarmed around the upper flanges like seabirds. After dark its windows were a constellation of goblin eyes and the beacon on top a torch that frightened stars away. But Admiralty House did not clash with the battlements, dome roofs, and craggy spires of the old quarter. Brechdan had seen to that. Rather, it was a culmination of them, their answer to the modern skyline. Its uppermost floor, decked by nothing except a level of traffic control automata, was his own eyrie.

A while after a certain sunset he was there in his secretorium. Besides himself, three living creatures—the three Hands of their

respective Vachs—were allowed entry. Passing through an unoccupied antechamber before which was posted a guard, they would put eyes and hands to scanner plates in the armored door. Upon positive identification, it would open until they had stepped through. Were more than one present, all must be identified first. The rule was enforced by alarms and robotic blasters.

The vault behind was fitted with spaceship-type air recyclers and thermostats. Walls, floor, ceiling were a sable against which Brechdan's black uniform nigh vanished; the medals he wore tonight glittered doubly fierce. The furnishing was usual for an office, desk, communicators, computer, dictoscribe. But in the center a beautifully grained wooden pedestal supported an opalescent box.

He walked thither and activated a second recognition circuit. A hum and swirl of dim colors told him that power had gone on. His fingers moved above the console. Photoelectric cells fired commands to the memory unit. Electromagnetic fields interacted with distorted molecules. Information was compared, evaluated, and assembled. In a nanosecond or two, the data he wanted—ultra-secret, available to none but him and his three closest, most trusted colleagues—flashed onto a screen.

Brechdan had seen the report before, but on an interstellar scale (every planet a complete world, old and infinitely complex) an overlord was doing extraordinarily well if he could remember that a specific detail was known, let alone the act itself. A sizeable party in the Council wanted to install more decision-making machines on that account. He had resisted them. Why ape the Terrans? Look what a state their dominions had gotten into. Personal government, to the greatest extent possible, was less stable but more flexible. Unwise to bind oneself to a single approach, in this unknowable universe.

"*Kraich.*" He switched his tail. Shwylt was entirely correct: the matter must be attended to without delay. An unimaginative provincial governor was missing a radium opportunity to bring one more planetary system into the power of the race.

And yet— He sought his desk. Sensing his absence, the data file went blank. He stabbed a communicator button. On sealed and scrambled circuit, his call flew across a third of the globe.

Shwylt Shipsbane growled "You woke me. Couldn't you pick a decent hour?"

"Which would be an indecent one for me," Brechdan laughed. "This Therayn business won't wait on our joint convenience. I have checked, and we'd best

get a fleet out there as fast as may be, together with a suitable replacement for Gadrol."

"Easy to say. But Gadrol will resent that, not without justice, and he has powerful friends. Then there are the Terrans. They'll hear about our seizure, and even though it's taken place on the opposite frontier to them, they'll react. We have to get a prognostication of what they'll do and a computation of how that'll effect events on Starkad. I've alerted Lifrith and Priadwyr. The sooner the four of us can meet on this problem, the better."

"I can't, though. The Terran delegation arrived today. I must attend a welcoming festival tonight."

"What?" Shwylt's jaws snapped together. "One of *their* stupid rites? Are you serious?"

"Quite. Afterward I must remain available to them. In Terran symbology, it would be grave indeed if the, gr-r-rum, the prime minister of Merseia snubbed the special representative of his Majesty."

"But the whole thing is such a farce!"

"They don't know that. If we disillusion them promptly, we'll accelerate matters off schedule. Besides, by encouraging their hopes for a Starkadian settlement we can soften the emotional impact of our occupying Therayn. Which means I shall have to pro-



long these talks more than I originally intended. Finally, I want some personal acquaintance with the significant members of this group."

Shwylt rubbed the spines on his head. "You have the strangest taste in friends."

"Like you?" Brechdan giped. "See here. The plan for Starkad is anything but a road we need merely walk at a precalculated pace. It has to be watched, nurtured, modified according to new developments, almost day by day. Something unforeseeable—a brilliant Terran move, a loss of morale among them, a change in attitude by the natives themselves—anything could throw off the timing and negate our whole strategy. The more subliminal data we possess, the better our judgments. For we do have to operate on their emotions as well as their military logic, and they are an alien race. We need empathy with them. In their phrase, we must play by ear."

Shwylt looked harshly out of the screen. "I suspect you actually like them."

"Why, that's no secret," Brechdan said. "They were magnificent once. They could be again. I would love to see them our willing subjects." His scarred features drooped a little. "Unlikely, of course. They're not that kind of species. We may be forced to exterminate."

"What about Therayn?" Shwylt demanded.

"You three take charge," Brechdan said. "I'll advise from time to time, but you will have full authority. After the post-seizure configuration has stabilized enough for evaluation, we can all meet and discuss how this will affect Starkad."

He did not add he would back them against an outraged Council risking his own position, if they should make some ruinous error. That went without saying.

"As you wish," nodded Shwylt. "Hunt well."

For a space he sat quiet. The day had been long for him. His bones felt stiff and his tail ached from the weight on it. Yes, he thought, one grows old; at first the thing merely creeps forward, a dulling of sense and a waning of strength, nothing that enzyme therapy can't handle—then suddenly, overnight, you are borne on a current so fast that the landscape blurs, and you hear the cataract roar ahead of you.

Dearly desired he to flit home, breathe the purity which blew around Dhangodhan's towers, chat over a hot cup with Elwych, his son, and then tumble to bed. But they awaited him at the Terran Embassy; and afterward he must return hither and meet with ...who was that agent waiting down in Intelligence?...Dwyr the Hook, aye; and then he might as

well bunk here for what remained of the night.

He squared his shoulders, swallowed a stimpill, and left the vault.

When he stepped out onto the landing flange the air was cool and damp. The roof screened the beacon from him and he saw clearly over Ardaig.

It was not a Terran city and knew nothing of hectic many-colored blaze after dark. Ground vehicles were confined to a few avenues, otherwise tubeways; the streets were for pedestrians and gwydh riders. Recreation was largely at home or in ancient theaters and sports fields. Shops—as contrasted to mercantile centers with communicator and delivery systems—were small enterprises, closed at this hour, which had been in the same house and the same family for generations. Tridaig shouted. Ardaig murmured, beneath a low salt wind. Luminous pavements wove their web over the hills, trapping lit windows; aircraft made moving lanterns above; spotlights on Afon simply heightened its austerity. Two of the four moons were aloft, Neihevin and Seith. The bay glowed and sparkled under them.

Brechdan's driver folded arms and bowed. Illogical, retaining that old gaffer when this aircar had a robopilot. But his family had always served the Ynvorys. Guards made their clashing salute

and entered the vehicle too. It purred off.

The stimulant took hold. Brechdan felt renewed eagerness. What might he not uncover tonight? *Relax*, he told himself, *keep patience, wait for the one gem to appear from a dungheap of formalisms...If we must exterminate the Terrans, we will at least have rid the universe of much empty chatter.*

His destination was another offense, a compound of residences and offices in the garish bubble style of the Imperium four hundred years ago. Then Merseia was an up-and-coming planet, worth a legation but in no position to dictate architecture or site. Qgoth Heights lay well outside Ardaig. Later the city grew around them and the legation became an embassy and Merseia could deny requests for expanded facilities.

Brechdan walked the entranceway alone, between rosebushes. He did admire that forlorn defiance. A slave took his cloak, a butler tall as himself announced him to the company. The usual pack of civilians in fancy dress, service attaches in uniform—no, yonder stood the newcomers. Lord Oliveira of Ganymede, Imperial Ambassador to his Supremacy the Roidhun, scurried forth. He was a thin and fussy man whose abilities had on a memorable occasion given Brechdan a disconcerting surprise.

"Welcome, Councillor," he said in Eriau, executing a Terran-style bow. "We are delighted you could come." He escorted his guest across the parquet floor. "May I present his Majesty's envoy, Lord Markus Hauksberg, Viscount of Ny Kalmar?"

"I am honored, sir." (Languid manner belied by physical condition, eyes that watched closely from beneath the lids, good grasp of language.)

"...Commander Max Abrams."

"The hand of the Vach Ynvory is my shield." (Dense accent, but fluent; words and gestures precisely right, dignified greeting of one near in rank to his master who is your equal. Stout frame, gray-shot hair, big nose, military carriage. So this was the fellow reported by courier to be coming along from Starkad. Handle with care.)

Introductions proceeded. Brechdan soon judged that none but Hauksberg and Abrams were worth more than routine attention. The latter's aide, Flandry, looked alert; but he was young and very junior.

A trumpet blew the "At Ease." Oliveira was being especially courteous in following local custom. But as this also meant females were excluded, most of his staff couldn't think what to do next. They stood about in dismal little groups, trying to make talk with their Merseian counterparts.

Brechdan accepted a glass of arthberry wine and declined further refreshment. He circulated for what he believed was a decent minimum time—let the Terrans know that he could observe their rituals when he chose—before he zeroed in on Lord Hauksberg.

"I trust your journey here was enjoyable," he began.

"A bit dull, sir," the viscount replied, "until your naval escort joined us. Must say they put on a grand show; and the honorguard after we landed was better yet. Hope no one minded my taping the spectacle."

"Certainly not, provided you stopped before entering Afon."

"Haw! Your, ah, foreign minister is a bit stiff, isn't he? But he was quite pleasant when I offered my credentials, and promised me an early presentation to his Supremacy."

Brechdan took Hauksberg's arm and strolled him toward a corner. Everyone got the hint; the party plodded on at a distance from where they two sat down below an abominable portrait of the Emperor.

"And how was Starkad?" Brechdan asked.

"Speaking for myself, sir, grim and fascinating," Hauksberg said. "Were you ever there?"

"No." Sometimes Brechdan was tempted to pay a visit. By the God, it was long since he had

been on a planet unraped by civilization! Impossible, however, at any rate for the next few years when Starkad's importance must be underplayed. Conceivably near the end— He decided that he hoped a visit would not be called for. Easier to make use of a world which was a set of reports than one whose people had been seen in their own lives.

"Well, scarcely in your sphere of interest, eh, sir?" Hauksberg said. "We are bemused by, ah, Merseia's endeavors."

"The Roidhunate has explained over and over."

"Of course. Of course. But mean to say, sir, if you wish to practice charity, as you obviously do, well aren't there equal needs closer to home? The Grand Council's first duty is to Merseia. I would be the last to accuse you of neglecting your duty."

Brechdan shrugged. "Another mercantile base would be useful in the Betelgeuse region. Starkad is not ideal, either in location or characteristics, but is acceptable. If at the same time we can gain the gratitude of a talented and deserving species, that tips the balance." He sharpened his gaze. "Your government's reaction was distressing."

"Predictable, though." Hauksberg sprawled deeper into his antique chromeplated chair. "To build confidence on both sides, until a true general agreement

can be reached—" mercifully, he did not say "between our great races"—"the interimperial buffer space must remain inviolate. I might add, sir, that the landfolk are no less deserving than the saefolk. Meaningless quibble, who was the initial aggressor. His Majesty's government feels morally bound to help the landfolk before their cultures go under."

"Now who is ignoring needs close to home?" Brechdan asked dryly.

Hauksberg grew earnest. "Sir, the conflict can be ended. If Merseia would join her good offices to ours, a planet wide arrangement could be made. And as for bases there, why should we not establish one together? A long stride toward real friendship, wouldn't you say?"

"Forgive possible rudeness," Brechdan parried. "But I am curious why your pacific mission here includes the chief of Intelligence operations on Starkad."

"As an advisor, sir," Hauksberg said with less enthusiasm.

"Simply as an advisor who knows more about the natives than anyone else who was available. Would you like to speak with him?" He raised an arm and called in Angelic, which Brechdan understood better than was publicly admitted: "Max! I say, Max, come over here for a bit, will you?"

Commander Abrams disengaged himself from an assistant secretary (Brechdan sympathized; that fellow was the dreariest of Oliveira's entire retinue) and saluted the Councillor. "May I serve the Hand?"

"Never mind ceremony, Max," Hauksberg said in Eriau. "We're not talking business tonight. Merely sounding each other out away from protocol and recorders. Please explain your intentions here."

"Give what facts I have and my opinions for whatever they are worth, if anyone asks," Abrams drawled. "I don't expect I'll be called on very often."

"Then why did you come, Commander?" Brechdan gave him his title, which he had not bothered to do for Hauksberg.

"Well, Hand, I did hope to ask a good many questions."

"Sit down," Hauksberg invited.

Abrams said, "With the Hand's leave?"

Brechdan touched a finger to his brow, feeling sure the other would understand. He felt a higher and higher regard for this man, which meant Abrams must be watched closer than anyone else.

The officer plumped his broad bottom into a chair. "I thank the Hand." He lifted a glass of whisky-and-soda to them, sipped, and said: "We really know so little on Terra about you. I couldn't tell

you how many Merseiological volumes are in the archives, but no matter; they can't possibly contain more than a fraction of the truth. Could well be we misinterpret you on any number of important points."

"You have your Embassy," Brechdan reminded him. "The staff includes xenologists."

"Not enough, Hand. Not by a cometary orbit. And in any event, most of what they do learn is irrelevant at my level. With your permission, I'd like to talk freely with a lot of different Merseians. Please keep those talks surveyed, to avoid any appearance of evil." Brechdan and Abrams exchanged a grin. "Also, I'd like access to your libraries, journals, whatever is public information as far as you're concerned but may not have reached Terra."

"Have you any specific problems in mind? I will help if I can."

"The Hand is most gracious. I'll mention just one typical point. It puzzles me; I've ransacked our files and turned researchers loose on it myself, and still haven't found an answer. How did Merseia come upon Starkad in the first place?"

Brechdan stiffened. "Exploring the region," he said curtly. "Unclaimed space is free to all ships."

"But suddenly, Hand, there you were, active on the confounded planet. Precisely how did you

happen to get interested?"

Brechdan took a moment to organize his reply. "Your people went through that region rather superficially in the old days," he said. "We are less eager for commercial profit than the Polesotechnic League was, and more eager for knowledge, so we mounted a systematic survey. The entry for Saxo, in your pilot's manual, made Starkad seem worth thorough study. After all, we too are attracted by planets with free oxygen and liquid water, be they never so inhospitable otherwise. We found a situation which needed correcting, and proceeded to send a mission. Inevitably, ships in the Betelgeuse trade noted frequent wakes near Saxo. Terran units investigated, and the present unhappy state of affairs developed."

"Hm." Abrams looked into his glass. "I thank the Hand. But it'd be nice to have more details. Maybe, buried somewhere among them, is a clue to something our side has misunderstood—semantic and cultural barrier, not so?"

"I doubt that," Brechdan said. "You are welcome to conduct inquiries, but on this subject you will waste your energy. there may not even be a record of the first several Merseian expeditions to the Saxo vicinity. We are not as concerned to put everything on tape as you."

Sensing his coldness, Hauks-

berg hastened to change the subject. Conversation petered out in banalities. Brechdan made his excuses and departed before midnight.

*A good opponent, Abrams, he thought. Too good for my peace of mind. He is definitely the one on whom to concentrate attention.*

*Or is he? Would a genuinely competent spy look formidable? He could be a—yes, they call it a stalking horse—for someone or something else. Then again, that may be what he wants me to think.*

Brechdan chuckled. This regression could go on forever. And it was not his business to play watchbeast. The supply of security officers was ample. Every move that every Terran made, outside the Embassy which they kept bugproof with annoying ingenuity, was observed as a matter of course.

Still, he was about to see in person an individual Intelligence agent, one who was important enough to have been sent especially to Starkad and especially returned when wily old Runei decided he could be more valuable at home. Dwyr the Hook might carry information worthy of the Council president's direct hearing. After which Brechdan could give him fresh orders...

In the icy fluorescence of an otherwise empty office, the thing

waited. Once it had been Merseian and young. The lower face remained, as a mask rebuilt by surgery; part of the torso; left arm and right stump. The rest was machine.

Its biped frame executed a surprisingly smooth salute. At such close quarters Brechdan, who had keen ears, could barely discern the hum from within. Power coursed out of capacitors which need not be recharged for several days, even under strenuous use: out through microminiaturized assemblies that together formed a body. "Service to my overlord." A faint metal tone rang in the voice.

Brechdan responded in honor. He did not know if he would have had the courage to stay alive so amputated. "Well met, Arlech Dwyr. At ease."

"The Iland of the Vach Ynvory desired my presence?"

"Yes, yes." Brechdan waved impatiently. "Let us have no more etiquette. I'm fed to the occiput with it. Apology that I kept you waiting, but before I could talk meaningfully about those Terrans I must needs encounter them for myself. Now then, you worked on the staff of Fodaich Runei's Intelligence corps as well as in the field, did you not? So you are conversant both with collated data and with the problems of gathering information in the first place. Good. Tell me in your own

words why you were ordered back."

"Hand," said the voice, "as an operative I was useful but not indispensable. The mission which I and no other might have carried out, failed: to burgle the office of the Terran chief of Intelligence."

"You expected success?" Brechdan hadn't known Dwyr was that good.

"Yes, Hand. I can be equipped with electromagnetic sensors and transducers, to feel out a hidden circuit. In addition, I have developed an empathy with machines. I can be aware, on a level below consciousness, of what they are about to do, and adjust my behavior accordingly. It is analogous to my former perception, the normal one, of nuances in expression, tone, stance on the part of fellow Merseians whom I knew intimately. Thus I could have opened the door without triggering an alarm. Unfortunately, and unexpectedly, living guards were posted. In physical strength, speed, and agility, this body is inferior to what I formally had. I could not have killed them unbeknownst to their mates."

"Do you think Abrams knows about you?" Brechdan asked sharply.

"No, Hand. Evidence indicates he is ultra-cautious by habit. Those Terrans who damaged me later in the jungle got no good

look at me. I did glimpse Abrams in companionship with the other, Hauksberg. This led us to suspect early that he would accompany the delegation to Merseia, no doubt in the hope of conducting espionage. Because of my special capabilities, and my acquaintance with Abrams' working methods, Fodaich Runei felt I should go ahead of the Terrans and await their arrival."

"*Khraich*. Yes. Correct." Brechdan forced himself to look at Dwyr as he would at a fully alive being. "You can be put into other bodies, can you not?"

"Yes, Hand," came from the blank visage. "Vehicles, weapons, detectors, machine tools, anything designed to receive my organic component and my essential prostheses. I do not take long to familiarize myself with their use. Under his Supremacy, I stand at your orders."

"You will have work," Brechdan said. "In truth you will. I know not what as yet. You may even be asked to burgle the envoy's ship in orbit. For a beginning, however, I think we must plan a program against our friend Abrams. He will expect the usual devices; you may give him a surprise. If you do, you shall not go unhonored."

Dwyr the Hook waited to hear further.

Brechdan could not forebear taking a minute for plain fleshly

comradeship. "How were you hurt?" he asked.

"In the conquest of Janair, Hand. A nuclear blast. The field hospital kept me alive and sent me to base for regeneration. But the surgeons there found that the radiation had too much deranged my cellular chemistry. At that point I requested death. They explained that techniques newly learned from Gorrazan gave hope of an alternative, which might make my service quite precious. They were correct."

Brechdan was momentarily startled. This didn't sound right—Well, he was no biomedic.

His spirits darkened. Why pretend pity? You can't be friends with the dead. And Dwyr was dead, in bone, sinew, glands, gonads, guts, everything but a brain which had nothing left except the single-mindedness of a machine. So, use him. That was what machines were for.

Brechdan took a turn around the room, hands behind back, tail unrestful, scar throbbing. "Good," he said. "Let us discuss procedure."

## Chapter V

"Oh, no," Abrams had said. "I thank most humbly the government of his Supremacy for this generous offer, but would not dream of causing such needless trouble and expense. True, the



Embassy cannot spare me an airboat. However, the ship we came in, *Dronning Margrete*, has a number of auxiliaries now idle."

"The Commander's courtesy is appreciated," bowed the official at the other end of the vidiphone line. "Regrettably, though, law permits no one not of Merseian race to operate within the Korychan System a vessel possessing hyperdrive capabilities. The Commander will remember that a Merseian pilot and engineer boarded his Lordship's vessel for the last sublight leg of the journey here. Is my information correct that the auxiliaries of his Lordship's so impressive vessel possess hyperdrives in addition to gravitics?"

"They do, distinguished colleague. But the two largest carry an airboat apiece as their own auxiliaries. I am sure Lord Hauksberg won't mind lending me one of those for my personal transportation. There is no reason to bother your department."

"But there is!" The Meeseian threw up his hands in quite a manlike gesture of horror. "The Commander, no less than his Lordship, is a guest of his Supremacy. We cannot disgrace his Supremacy by failing to show what hospitality lies within our power. A vessel will arrive tomorrow for the Commander's personal use. The delay is merely so that it may be furnished com-

fortably for Terrans and the controls modified to a Terran pattern. The boat can sleep six, and we will stock its galley with whatever is desired and available here. It has full aerial capability, has been checked out for orbital use, and could no doubt reach the outermost moon at need. I beg for the Commander's acceptance."

"Distinguished colleague, I in turn beg that you, under his Supremacy, accept my sincerest thanks," Abrams beamed.

The beam turned into a guffaw as soon as he had cut the circuit. Of course the Merseians weren't going to let him travel around unescorted—not unless they could bug his transportation. And of course they would expect him to look for eavesdropping gimmicks and find any of the usual sorts. Therefore he really needn't conduct that tedious search.

Nonetheless, he did. Negligence would have been out of character. To those who delivered his beautiful new flier he explained that he set technicians swarming through her to make certain that everything was understood about her operation; different cultures, different engineering, don't y' know. The routine disclaimer was met by the routine pretense of believing it. The airboat carried no spy gadgets apart from the one he had been hoping for. He found this by the simple expedient of wait-

ing till he was alone aboard and then asking. The method of its concealment filled him with admiration.

But thereafter he ran into a stone wall—or, rather, a pot of glue. Days came and went, the long thirty-seven hour days of Merseia. He lost one after another by being summoned to the chamber in Castle Afon where Hauksberg and staff conferred with Brechdan's puppets. Usually the summons was at the request of a Merseian, who wanted elucidation of some utterly trivial question about Starkad. Having explained, Abrams couldn't leave. Protocol forbade. He must sit there while talk droned on, inquiries, harangues, haggles over points which a child could see were unessential—oh, yes, these greenskins had a fine art of making negotiations interminable.

Abrams said as much to Hauksberg, once when they were back at the Embassy. "I know," the viscount snapped. He was turning gaunt and hollow-eyed. "They're so suspicious of us. Well, we're partly to blame for that, eh? Got to show good faith. While we talk, we don't fight."

"They fight on Starkad," Abrams grumbled around his cigar. "Terra won't wait on Brechdan's comma-counting forever."

"I'll dispatch a courier presently, to report and explain. We are gettin' somewhere, don't for-

get. They're definitely int'rested in establishin' a system for continuous medium-level conference between the governments."

"Yah. A great big gorgeous idea which'll give political leverage to our accommodationists at home for as many years as Brechdan feels like carrying on discussions about it. I thought we came here to settle the issue."

"I thought I was the head of this mission," Hauksberg retorted. "That'll do, Commander." He yawned and stretched, stiffly. "One more drink and ho for bed. Lord Emp'ror, but I'm tired!"

On days when he was not immobilized Abrams ground through library research and interviews. Most of the time Flan-dry assisted him, except when the boy was off somewhere with Hauksberg's concubine, who apparently wasn't seeing much of her busy lord these days.

Yes, the Merseians were most courteous and helpful. They flooded Abrams with books and periodicals. Officers and officials would talk to him for hours on end. That was the trouble. Aside from whatever feel he might be getting for the basic setup, he learned precisely nothing.

But events should not be left on dead zero as long as Brechdan wished. The situation right now carried potentials which only a traitor would fail to exploit. Nonetheless, the way matters had de-

veloped, with the mission detained on Merseia for an indefinite period, Abrams could not exploit them as he had originally schemed. The classically neat operation he had had in mind must be turned into an explosion.

And Flandry was the fuse.

So one day he called the boy into the office assigned to them at the embassy.

"We're going for a ride."

"Sir?" Flandry blinked.

"Little pleasure trip. Don't you think we deserve one by now? A run to Gethwyd Forest, say; that's an unrestricted area."

Flandry looked past his boss' burly form, out the window to the compound. A garden robot whickered among the roses, struggling to maintain the microecology they required. A secretary on the diplomatic staff stood outside one of the residence bubbles, flirting boredly with the assistant naval attache's wife. Beyond them, Ardaig's modern towers shouldered brutally skyward. The afternoon was hot and quiet.

Then he stared back at Abrams. He knew the man by now. At least, he could spot when something unadmitted lurked under the skin. His spine tingled. Howevermuch he had grumbled about the desk work, however sarcastic he had waxed about the glamorous life in romantic alien capitals, he wasn't sure he liked the change.

"Very good, sir," he said.

They left the office and crossed aboveground to the garages. The Merseians technicians reported periodically to inspect the luxury boat lent Abrams, but today a lone human was on duty. Envious, he floated the long blue teardrop out into the sunlight. Abrams and Flandry boarded, sealed the door, and found chairs in the saloon. "Gethwyd Forest, main parking area," Abrams said. "Five hundred KPH. Any altitude will do."

The machine communicated with other machines. Clearance was granted and lane assigned. The boat rose noiselessly. On Terra, its path could have been monitored, but the haughty chieftains of Merseia had not allowed that sort of capability to be built in for possible use against them. Traffic control outside of restricted sections was automatic and anonymous. Unless they shadowed a boat, or bugged it somehow, security officers were unable to keep it under surveillance. Abrams had remarked that he liked that, on principle as well as because of his own convenience.

He groped in his tunic for a cigar. "We could have a drink," he suggested. "Whisky and water for me."

Flandry got it with a stiff cognac for himself. By the time he returned from the bar, they were levelled off at about six kilo-

meters and headed north. They would take a couple of hours, at this ambling pace, to reach the preserve which the Vach Dathyr had opened to the public. Flandry had been there before, on a holiday excursion Oliveira arranged for Hauksberg and company. He remembered great solemn trees, gold-feathered birds, the smell of humus and the wild taste of a spring. Most vividly he remembered sunflecks patterned across Persis' thin gown. Now he saw the planet's curve through a broad viewport, the ocean gleaming westward, the megalopolitan maze giving way to fields and isolated castles.

"Sit down," Abrams said. His hand chopped at a lounge. Smoke hazed him where he sprawled.

Flandry lowered himself. He wet his lips. "You've business with me, haven't you?" he said.

"Right on the first guess! To win your Junior Spy badge and pocket decoder, tell me what an elephant is."

"Huh, sir?"

"An elephant is a mouse built to government specifications. Or else a mouse is a transistorized elephant." Abrams didn't look jovial. He was delaying.

Flandry took a nervous sip. "If it's confidential," he asked, "should we be here?"

"Safer than the Embassy. That's only probably debugged,

not certainly, and old-fashioned listening at doors hasn't ever quite gone out of style."

"But a Merseian runabout—"

"We're safe. Take my word."

Abrams glared at the cigar he rolled between his fingers. "Son, I need you for a job of work and I need you bad. Could be dangerous and sure to be nasty. Are you game?"

Flandry's heart bumped. "I'd better be, hadn't I?"

Abrams cocked his head at the other. "Not bad repartee for a nineteen-year old. But do you mean it, down in your bones?"

"Yes, sir." *I think so.*

"I believe you. I have to."

Abrams took a drink and a long drag. Abruptly: "Look here, let's review the circumstances as she stands. I reckon you have the innate common sense to see what's written on your eyeballs, that Brechdan hasn't got the slightest intention of settling the squabble on Starkad. I thought for a while, maybe he figured to offer us peace there in exchange for some other thing he really wants. But if that were the case, he wouldn't have thrown a triple gee field onto the parley the way he has. He'd have come to the point with the unavoidable minimum of waste motion. Merseians don't take a human's glee in forensics. If Brechdan wanted to strike a bargain, Hauksberg would be home on Terra right now.

"Instead, Brechdan's talkboys have stalled, with one quibble and irrelevancy after another. Even Hauksberg's getting a gutful. Which I think is the reason. Brechdan personally invited him and aides to Dhangodhan for a week or two of shootin' and fishin! Partly because that makes one more dealy by itself; partly to smooth our viscount's feeling with a 'gesture of goodwill.' " The quotes were virtually audible. "I was invited too, but begged off on grounds of wanting to continue my researches. If he'd thought of it, Brechdan'd likely have broken custom and asked Donna Persis, as an added inducement for staying in the mountains a while. Unless, hm, he's provided a little variety for his guests. There are humans in Merseian service, you know."

Flandry nodded. "But I wonder why Brechdan agreed to receive a delegation in the first place."

"Oh, easier to accept than refuse, I suppose. Or it might have suited his plans very well. He doesn't want total war yet. I do believe he originally intended to send us packing in fairly short order. What hints I've gathered suggest that another issue has arisen—that he's planning quite a different move, not really germane to Starkad—and figures to put a better face on it by acting mild toward us. God alone knows how long we'll be kept here."

Abrams leaned forward. "And meanwhile," he continued. "anything could happen. I came with some hopes of pulling off a hell of a good stunt just before we left. And it did look hopeful at first, too. Could give us the truth about Starkad. Well, things have dragged on, configurations have changed, my opportunity may vanish. We've got to act soon, or spoil our chances."

*This is it*, Flandry thought, and a part of him jeered at the banality, and he waited with hard-held breath.

"I don't want to tell you more than I've got to," Abrams said. "Just this: I've learned where Brechdan's ultra-secret files is. wasn't hard; everybody knows about it. But I think I can get an agent in there. The next and worst problem will be to get the information out, and not have the fact we're doing so be known."

"I dare not wait till we all go home. That gives too much time for too many things to go wrong. Nor can I leave beforehand by myself. I'm too damn conspicuous. It'd look too much as if I'd finished whatever I set out to do. Hauksberg himself might forbid me to go, precisely because he suspected I was going to queer his pe-ea-eace mission. Or else... I'd be piloted out of the system by Merseians. Brechdan's bully boys could arrange an unfortunate accident merely as a precaution."

They could even spirit me off to a hypnoprobe room, and what happened to me there wouldn't matter a hootlet compared to what'd happen to our forces later. I'm not being melodramatic, son. Those are the unbuttered facts of life."

Flandry sat still. "You want me to convey the data out, if you get them," he said.

"Ah, you do know what an elephant is."

"You must have a pretty efficient pipeline to Merseian HQ."

"I've seen worse," Abrams said rather smugly.

"Couldn't have been developed in advance. Had it been, why should you yourself come here? Must be something you got hold of on Starkad, and hadn't a chance to instruct anyone about that you trusted and who could be spared."

"Let's get down to business," Abrams said fast. "The best way I can see to get that information out soon involves a pretty dirty trick too. Also a humiliating one. I'd like to think you can hit on a better idea, but I've tried and failed."

Flandry gulped. "What is it?" Abrams approached the core gingerly. "The problem is this," he said. "I do believe we can raid that file unbeknownst. Especially now while Brechdan is away, and the three others who I've found have access to that certain room. But even so, it'd look too funny

if anyone left right after who didn't have a plausible reason. You can have one."

"Well . . . if Lord Hauksberg caught you in *flagrante delicto* with his toothsome traveling companion—"

That would have unbraced a far more sophisticated person. Flandry leaped from his seat. "Sir!"

"Down boy. Don't tell me the mice haven't been playing while the cat's elsewhere. You've been so crafty that I don't think anybody else guesses, even in our gossipy little enclave. Which augurs well for your career in Intelligence. But son, I work close to you. When you and she keep swapping glances—Must I spell every word? No matter. I don't condemn you. If I weren't an old man with some eccentric ideas about my marriage, I'd be jealous."

"But this does give us our chance. All we need do is keep Persis from knowing when her lord and master is coming back. She don't mix much with the rest of the compound—can't say I blame her—and you can provide the distraction to make sure. Then the message sent ahead—which won't be to her personally anyhow, only to alert the servants in the expectation they'll tell everyone—I'll see to it that the word doesn't reach her. For the rest, let nature take its course."

"No!" Flandry raged.

"Have no fears for her,"

Abrams said. "She may suffer no more than a scolding. Lord Hauksberg is pretty tolerant. Anyway he ought to be. If she does lose her position . . . our corps has a slush fund. She can be supported in reasonable style on Terra till she hooks someone else. I really don't have the impression she'd be heartbroken at having to trade Lord Hauksberg in on a newer model."

"But—" Confound that blush! Flandry stared at the deck. His fists beat on his knees. I can't."

"I said this was a dirty business. Do you flatter yourself she's in love with you?"

"Well—uh—"

"You do. I wouldn't. But suppose she is, a psych treatment for something that simple is cheap, and she's cool enough to get one. I've spent more time worrying about you."

"What about me?" asked Flandry miserably.

"Lord Hauksberg has to retaliate on you. Whatever his private feelings, he can't let something like this go by; because the whole compound, hell, eventually all Terra is going to know, if you handle the scene right. He figures on dispatching a courier home a day or two after he gets back from Dhangodhan, with a progress report. You'll go on the same boat, in disgrace, charged with some crime like disrespect for hereditary authority.

"Somewhere along the line—I'll pass it to you. Once on Terra you'll use a word I'll give you to get the ear of a certain man. Afterward—son, you're in. You shouldn't be fumblydiddling this way. You should be licking my boots for such an opportunity to get noticed by men who count. My boots need polishing."

Flandry shifted, looked away, out to the clouds which drifted across the green and brown face of Merseia. The motor hum pervaded his skull.

"What about you?" he asked finally. "And the rest?"

"We'll stay here till the farce is over."

"But...no, wait, sir...so many things could go wrong. Deadly wrong."

"I know. That's the risk you take."

"You more." Flandry swung back to Abrams. "I might get free without a hitch. But if later there's any suspicion—"

"They won't bother Persis," Abrams said. "She's not worth the trouble. Nor Hauksberg. He's an accredited diplomat, and arresting him would damn near be an act of war."

"But you, sir! You may be accredited to him, but—"

"Don't fret," Abrams said. "I aim to die of advanced senile decay. If that starts looking unlikely, I've got my blaster. I won't get taken alive and I

won't go out of the cosmos alone. Now: are you game?"

It took Flandry's entire strength to nod.

## Chapter VI

Two days later, Abrams departed the Embassy again in his boat. Ahead, on the ocean's rim, smoldered a remnant of sunset. The streets of Ardaig glowed evermore visible as dusk deepened into night. Windows blinked to life, the Admiralty beacon flared like a sudden red sun. Traffic was heavy, and the flier's robopilot must keep signals constantly flickering between itself, others, and the nearest routing stations. The computers in all stations were still more tightly linked, by a web of data exchange. Its nexus was Central Control, where the total pattern was evaluated and the three-dimensional grid of airplanes adjusted from minute to minute for optimum flow.

From the darkness where he lay, Dwyr the Hook willed a scrambled message forth. Not sent: willed, as one wills a normal voice to speak; for his nerve endings meshed directly with the circuits of the vessel and he felt the tides in the electronic sea which filled Ardaig like a living creature feeling the tides in its own blood.

"Prime Observer Three to In-

telligence Division Thirteen." A string of code symbols followed. "Prepare to receive report."

Kilometers away, a Merseian tautened at his desk. He was among the few who knew about Dwyr; they alternated shifts around the clock. Thus far nothing of great interest had been revealed to them. But that was good. It proved the Terran agent, whom they had been warned was dangerous, had accomplished nothing. "Division Thirteen to Prime Three. Dhech on duty. Report."

"Abrams has boarded alone and instructed the pilot to take him to the following location." Dwyr specified. He identified the place as being in a hill suburb, but no more; Ardaig was not his town.

"Ah, Yes," Dhech nodded. "Fodaich Qwynn's home. We knew already Abrams was going there tonight."

"Shall I expect anything to happen?" Dwyr asked.

"No, you'll be parked for several hours, I'm sure, and return him to the Embassy. He's been after Qwynn for some time for an invitation, so they could talk privately and at length about certain questions of mutual interest. Today he pressed so hard that Qwynn found it impossible not to invite him for tonight without open discourtesy."

"Is that significant?"

"Hardly. We judge Abrams makes haste simply because he



got word that his chief will return tomorrow with the Hand of the Vach Ynvory, great protector of us all. Thereafter he can expect once more to be enmeshed in diplomatic maneuverings. This may be his last chance to see Qwynn."

"I could leave the boat and spy upon them," Dwyr offered.

"No need. Qwynn is discreet, and will make his own report to us. If Abrams hopes to pick up a useful crumb, he will be disappointed. Quite likely, though his interest is academic. He appears to have abandoned any plans he may have entertained for conducting espionage."

"He has certainly done nothing suspicious under my surveillance," Dwyr said, "in a boat designed to make him think it ideal for hatching plots. I will be glad when he leaves. This has been a drab assignment."

"Honor to you for taking it," Dhech said. "No one else could have endured so long." A burst of distortion made him start. "What's that?"

"Some trouble with the communicator," said Dwyr, who had willed the malfunction. "It had better be checked soon. I might lose touch with you."

"We'll think of some excuse to send a technician over in a day or so. Hunt well."

"Hunt well." Dwyr broke the connection.

Through the circuits, which included scanners, he observed both outside and inside the hull. The boat was slanting down toward its destination. Abrams had risen and donned a formal cloak. Dwyr activated a speaker. "I have contacted Division Thirteen," he said. "They are quite unsuspecting. I planted the idea that my sender may go blank, in case for some reason they try to call me while I am absent."

"Good lad." Abrams' tones were likewise calm, but he took a last nervous pull on his cigar and stubbed it out viciously. "Now remember, I'll stay put for several hours. Should give you ample time to do your job and slip back into this shell. But if anything goes wrong, I repeat, what matters is the information. Since we can't arrange a safe drop, and since mine host tonight will have plenty of retainers to arrest me, in an emergency you get hold of Ensign Flandry and tell him. You recall he should be in Lord Hauksberg's suite, or else his own room; and I've mapped the Embassy for you. Now also, make damn sure the phone here is hooked to the 'pilot, so you or he can call this boat to him. I haven't told him about you, but I have told him to trust absolutely whoever has the key word. You remember?"

"Yes, of course. *Meshuggah*. What does it mean?"

"Never mind." Abrams grin-

ned expansively and shrugged.

"What about rescuing you?"

"Don't . You'd come to grief for certain. Besides, my personal chances are better if I invoke diplomatic immunity. I hope, though, our stunt will go off without a hitch." Abrams looked about. "I can't see you, Dwyr, and I can't shake your hand, but I'd sure like to. And one day I plan to." The boat grounded. "Good luck."

Let us commence, Dwyr thought. His decision was altogether unperturbed. Once he would have tasted fear, felt his heart thud, clutched to him the beloved images of wife and young and their home upon far Tanis. Courage would have followed, sense of high purpose, joy of proving his maleness by a leap between the horns of death—thus did you know yourself wholly alive! But those things had departed with his body. He could no longer recollect how they felt. The one emotion which never left him, like an unhealing wound, was the wish to know all emotions again.

He had a few. Workmanship gave a cerebral pleasure. Hate and fury could still burn...though cold, cold. He wondered if they were not mere habits, engraved in the synapses of his brain.

He stirred in the womblike cubicle where he lay. Circuit by circuit, his living arm disconnected his machine parts from the boat.

For a moment he was totally cut off. How many hours till sensory-deprivation broke down his sanity? He had been kept supplied with impressions of the world, and asleep he never dreamed. But suppose he stayed where he was, in this lightless, soundless, currentless nothing. When he began to hallucinate, would he imagine himself back on Tanis? Or would Sivilla his wife come to him?

Nonsense. The objective was that he come to her, whole. He opened a panel and glided forth. The systems that kept him functional were mounted in a tiny gravsled. His first task would be to exchange it for a more versatile body.

Emerging, he floated low, keeping to the bushes and shadows. Stars were plainer to see here, away from the city web and the beacon flare which lay at the foot of these hills. He noted the sun of Tanis, where Merseians had made their homes among mountains and forests, where Sivilla lived yet with their children. She thought him dead, but they told him she had not remarried and the children were growing up well.

Was that another lie?

The problem of weaving his way unseen into the city occupied a bare fragment of Dwyr's attention. His artificial senses were designed for this kind of task, and he had a decade of experience with them. Mostly he was remembering.

"I was reluctant to leave," he had confessed to Abrams on Star-kad. "I was happy. What was the conquest of Janair to me? They spoke of the glory of the race. I saw nothing except that other race, crushed, burned, enslaved as we advanced. I would have fought for my liberty as they did for theirs. Instead, being required to do my military service, I was fighting to rob them of their birth-right. Do not misunderstand. I stayed loyal to my Roidhun and my people. It was they who betrayed me."

"They sure as the seventh hell did," Abrams said.

That was after the revelation which knocked Dwyr's universe apart. "What?" Abrams had roared. "You could not be regenerated? Impossible!"

"But radiation damage to the cells—"

"With that kind of radiation damage, you'd've been dead. The basic gene pattern governs the organism throughout life. If everything mutated at once, life would have to stop. And the regeneration process uses the chromosomes for a chemical template. No, they saw their chance to make a unique tool out of you, and lied. I suppose they must've planted an unconscious mental bloc too, so you'd never think to study basic biomedicine for yourself, and avoid situations where somebody might tell you. God! I've

seen some vile tricks in my time, but this one takes the purple shaft, with pineapple clusters."

"You can heal me?" Dwyr screamed.

"Our chemosurgeons can. But slow down. Let's think a bit. I could order the job done on you, and would as a matter of ethics. Still, you'd be cut off from your family. What we ought to do is smuggle them out also. We could resettle you on an Imperial planet. And I haven't the authority to arrange that. Not unless you rate it. Which you could, by serving as a double agent."

"To you too, then, I am nothing but a tool."

"Easy. I didn't say that. I just said that getting back your family won't come cheap. It'll involve some risk to the crew who fetch them. You've got to earn a claim on us. Willing?"

Oh, very willing!

As he darted between towers, Dwyr was no more conspicuous than a nightbird. He could easily reach the place assigned him, on an upper level of a control station where only computers dwelt, without being noticed. That had been arranged on Brechdan Ironrede's own command. The secret of Dwyr's existence was worth taking trouble to preserve. A recognition lock opened for him, and he glided into a room crowded with his bodies and attachments. There was nothing else; an ampu-

tated personality did not carry around the little treasures of a mortal.

He had already chosen what to take. After detaching from the sled, he hitched himself to the biped body which lay stretched out like a metal corpse. For those moments he was without any senses but sight, hearing, a dim touch and kinesthesia, a jab of pain through what remained of his tissues. He was glad when he had finished making the new connections.

Rising, he lumbered about and gathered what else he would need and fastened it on: special tools and sensors, a gravity impeller, a blaster. How weak and awkward he was. He much preferred being a vehicle or a gun. Metal and plastic did not substitute well for cells, nerves, muscles, the marvelous structure which was bone. But tonight an unspecialized shape was required.

Last came some disguise. He could not pass for Merseian (after what had been done to him) But he could look like a space suited human or Iskeled. The latter race had long ago become resigned to the domination of his and furnished many loyal personnel. No few had been granted Merseian citizenship. It had less significance than the corresponding honor did for Terra, but it carried certain valuable privileges.

Ready. Dwyr left his room and took to the air again, openly this time. Admiralty House grew before him, a gaunt mountain where caves glared and the beacon made a volcano spout. A sound of machines mumbled through the sky he clove. He sensed their radiation as a glow, a tone, a rising wave. Scaring, he approached the forbidden zone and spoke, on a tight beam those pass-words Brechdan had given him. "Absolute security," he added. "My presence is to be kept secret."

When he landed on the flange, an officer had joined the sentries. "What is your business on this level?" the Merseian demanded. "Our protector the Hand is not in Ardaig."

"I know," Dwyr said. "I am at his direct orders, to conduct some business inside. That is as much as I am allowed to tell you. You and these males will admit me, and let me out in a while, and forget I was ever here. It is not to be mentioned to anyone in any circumstances. The matter is sealed."

"Under what code?"

"Triple Star."

The officer saluted. "Pass."

Dwyr went down the corridor. It echoed a little to his footfalls. When he reached the anteroom, he heard the buzz of work in the offices beyond; but he stood alone at the door of the vault. He had never seen this place. However,

the layout was no secret and had been easy to obtain.

The door itself, though—he approached with immense care, every sensor at full amplification. The scanners saw he was not authorized to go by, and might trigger an alarm. No. Nothing. After all, people did use this route on certain errands. He removed the false glove on his robot arm and extended tendrils to the plates.

They reacted. By induction, his artificial neurones felt how signals moved into a comparison unit and were rejected. So now he must feed in pulses which would be interpreted as the right eye and hand patterns. Slowly... slowly, micrometric exactitude, growing into the assembly, feeling with it, calling forth the response he wanted, a seduction which stirred instincts until his machine heart and lungs moved rapidly and he was lost to the exterior world... *there!*

The door opened, ponderous and silent. He trod through. It closed behind him. In a black chamber, he confronted a thing which shone like opal.

Except for possessing a recognition trigger of its own, the molecular file was no different from numerous others he had seen. Still full of oneness with the flow of electrons and intermeshed fields, still half in a dream, he activated it. The operation code

was unknown to him, but he detected that not much information was stored here. Stood to reason, the thought trickled at the back of his awareness. No individual could single-handed steer an empire. The secrets which Brechdan reserved for himself and his three comrades must be few, however tremendous. He, Dwyr the Hook, need not carry on a lengthy random search before he got the notes on Starkad.

*Eidhafor:* Report on another Hand who often opposed Brechdan in Council; data which could be used, at need, to break him.

*Maxwell Crawford:* Ha, the Terran Emperor's governor of the Arachnean System was in Merseian pay. A sleeper, kept in reserve.

*Therayn:* So that was what pre-occupied Brechdan's friends. Abrams was evidently right; Hauksberg was being delayed so as to be present, influenceable, when the news broke.

*Starkad!*

Onto the screen flashed a set of numbers. 0.17847, 3° 14' 22" .591, 1818 h.3264 . . . Dwyr memorized them automatically, while he stood rigid with shock. Something had happened in the file. An impulse had passed. Its transient radiation had given his nerves a split second's wispy shiver. Might be nothing. But better finish up and get out fast!

The screen blanked. Dwyr's fingers moved with blurring speed. The numbers returned. Why—they were the whole secret. They were what Starkad was about. And he didn't know what they meant.

Let Abrams solve this riddle. Dwyr's task was done. Almost.

He went toward the door. It opened and he stepped into the antechamber. The door behind, to the main offices, was agape. A guard waited, blaster poised. Two more were hurrying toward him. Desk workers scuttled from their path.

"What is the matter?" Dwyr rapped. Because he could not feel terror or dismay, a blue flame of wrath sheeted through him.

Sweat glistened on the guard's forehead and ran down over the brow ridges. "You were in his secretorium," he whispered.

*So terrible is the magic in those numbers that the machine has had one extra gear laid upon it. When they are brought forth, it calls for help.*

"I am authorized," Dwyr said. "How else do you think I could enter?"

He did not really believe his burglary could long remain unknown. Too many had seen. But he might gain a few hours. His voice belied. "No one is to speak of this to anyone else whatsoever, not even among yourselves. The business is sealed under a code

which the officer of the night knows. He can explain its significance to you. Let me pass."

"No." The blaster trembled.

"Do you wish to be charged with insubordination?"

"I ...I must take that risk, forsee. We all must. You are under arrest until the Hand clears you in person."

Dwyer's motors snarled. He drew his own gun as he flung himself aside. Fire and thunder broke free. The Merseian collapsed in a seared heap. But he had shot first. Dwyr's living arm was blasted off.

He did not go into shock. He was not that alive. Pain flooded him, he staggered for a moment in blindness. Then the homeostats in his prostheses reacted. Chemical stimulation poured from tubes into veins. Electronic impulses at the control of a micro-computer joined the nerve currents, damped out agony, forced the flesh to stop bleeding. Dwyr whirled and ran.

The others came behind him. Guns crashed anew. He staggered from their impact. Looking down, he saw a hole drilled in him from back to breast. The energy beam must have wrecked some part of the mechanism which kept his brain alive. What part, he didn't know. Not the circulation, for he continued moving. The filtration system, the purifier, the osmotic balancer? He'd find out soon e-

nough. *Crash!* His left leg went immobile. He fell. The clatter was loud in the corridor. Why hadn't he remembered his impeller? He willed the negagravity field to go on. Still he lay like a stone. The Merseians pounded near, shouting. He flipped the manual switch and rose.

The door to the flange stood shut. At top speed, he tore the panels asunder. A firebolt from a guard rainbowed off his armor. Out... over the verge... down toward shadow!

And shadows were closing in on him. His machinery must indeed have been struck in a vital spot. It would be good to die. No, not yet. He must hang on a while longer. Get by secret ways to the Terran Embassy; Abrams was too far, and effectively a prisoner in any event. Get to the Embassy—summon the airboat—the fact that his identity was unknown to his pursuers until they called Brechdan would help—try for an escape—if you must faint, hide yourself first, and do not die, do not die—perhaps Flandry can save you. If nothing else, you will have revenged yourself a little if you find him. Darkness and great rushing waters. . .

Dwyr the Hook fled alone over the night city.

## Chapter VII

That afternoon, Abrams had

entered the office where Flandry was at work. He closed the door and said, "All right, son, you can knock off."

"Glad to," Flandry said. Preparing a series of transcribed interviews for the computer was not his idea of sport, especially when the chance of anything worthwhile being buried in them hovered near zero. He shoved the papers across his desk, leaned back, and tensed cramped muscles against each other. "How come?"

"Lord Hauksberg's valet just called the majordomo here. They're returning tomorrow morning. Figure to arrive about Period Four, which'd be fourteen or fifteen hundred Thursday, Terran Prime Meridian."

Flandry sucked in a breath, wheeled his chair about and stared up at his chief. "Tonight—?"

"Uh-huh," Abrams nodded. "I won't be around. For reasons you don't need to know, except that I want attention focused my way. I'm going to wangle me an invite to a local Pooh-Bah."

"And a partial alibi, if events go sour." Flandry spoke with only the top half of his mind engaged. He glanced at his chrono. Persis was doubtless asleep. Unlike Navy men, who were trained to adapt to nonterrestrial diurnal periods by juggling watches, the Embassy civilians split Merseia's rotation time into two short, complete "days." She

followed the practice. "I suppose I'm to stand by in reserve," he said. "Another reason for our separating."

"Smart boy," Abrams said. "You deserve a pat and a dog biscuit. I hope your lady fair will provide the same."

"I still hate to, to use her this way."

"In your position, I'd enjoy every second. Besides, don't forget your friends on Starkad. They're being shot at."

"Y-yes." Flandry rose. "What about, emergency procedure?"

"Be on tap, either in her place or yours. Our agent will identify himself by a word I'll think of. He may look funny, but trust him. I can't give you specific orders. Among other reasons, I don't like saying even this much here, however unbuggable we're alleged to be. Do whatever seems best. Don't act too damned fast. Even if the gaff's been blown, you might yet manage to ride out the aftermath. But don't hesitate too long, either. If you must move, then move: but no heroics, no rescues, no consideration for any living soul. Just get that information out!"

"Aye, aye, sir."

Later, when twilight stole across the city, Flandry made his way to the principal guest suite. The corridor was deserted. Ideally, Lord Hauksberg should come upon his impudence as a com-

plete surprise. That way, the viscount would be easier to provoke into rage. However, if this didn't work—if Persis learned he was expected and shooed Flandry out—the scandal must be leaked to the entire compound. He had a scheme for arranging that.

He chimed on the door. After a while, her voice came drowsy. "Who's there?" He waved at the scanner. "Oh. What is it, Ensign?"

"May I come in, Donna?"

She stopped to throw on a robe. Her hair was tumbled and she was charmingly flushed. He entered and closed the door. "We needn't be so careful," he said. "Nobody watching. My boss is gone for the night and a good part of tomorrow." He laid hands on her waist. "I couldn't pass up the chance."

"Nor I." She kissed him at great length.

"Why don't we simply hide in here?" he suggested.

"I'd adore to. But Lord Oliveira—"

"Call the butler. Explain you're indisposed and want to be alone till tomorrow. Hm?"

"Not very polite. Hell, I'll do it. We have so little time, darling."

Flandry stood in back of the vidiphone while she talked. If the butler should mention that Hauksberg was due in, he must commence Plan B. But that didn't happen, as curt as Persis was.



She ordered food and drink 'chuted here and switched off. He deactivated the instrument. "I don't want any distractions," he explained.

"What wonderful ideas you have," she smiled.

\* \* \*

They were lying side by side, savoring an ancient piece of music when the door recognized and admitted Lord Hauksberg.

"Persis? I say, where—Great Emperor!"

He stopped cold in the bedroom archway. Persis smothered a scream and snatched for her robe. Flandry jumped to his feet. *But it's still dark! What's happened?*

The blond man looked altogether different in green hunting clothes and belted blaster. Sun and wind had darkened his face. For an instant that visage was fluid with surprise. Then the lines congealed. The eyes flared like blue stars. He clapped hand to weapon butt. "Well, well," he said.

"Mark—" Persis reached out.

He ignored her. "So you're the indisposition she had," he said to Flandry.

*Here we go. Off schedule, but lift grays anyway.* The boy felt blood course thickly, sweat trickle down ribs; worse than fear, he was aware how ludicrous he must look. He achieved a grin. "No, my lord. You are."

"What d'you mean?"

"You weren't being man enough." Flandry's belly grew stiff confronting that gun. Strange to hear Mozart lilting on in the background.

The blaster stayed sheathed. Hauksberg moved only to breathe. "How long's this been between you?"

"It was my fault, Mark," Persis cried. "All mine." Tears whipped over her cheeks.

"No, my sweet, I insist," Flandry said. "My idea entirely. I must say, my lord, you weren't nice to arrive unannounced. Now what?"

"Now you're under nobleman's arrest, you whelp," Hauksberg said. "Put on some clothes. Go to your quarters and stay there."

Flandry scrambled to obey. On the surface, everything had gone smoothly, more so than expected. Too much more so. Hauksberg's tone was not furious; it was almost absent-minded.

Persis groped toward him. "I tell you, Mark, I'm to blame," she wept. "Let him alone. Do what you want to me, but not him!"

Persis groped toward him. "I tell you, Mark, I'm to blame,"

Hauksberg shoved her away. "Stop blubberin," he snapped. "D' you think I care a pip on a 'scope about your peccadillos, at a time like this?"

"What's happened?" Flandry asked sharply.

Hauksberg turned and looked at him, up and down, silent for an entire minute. "Wonder if you really don't know," he said at the end. "Wonder quite a lot."

"My lord, I don't! Flandry's mind rocked. Something *was* wrong.

"When word came to Dhangodhan, natur'lly we flitted straight back," Hauksberg said. "They're after Abrams this minute, on my authority. But you— what was your part?"

*I've got to get out. Abrams' agent has to be able to reach me.* "I don't know anything, my lord. I'll report to my room."

Persis sat on the bed, face in hands, and sobbed. She wasn't loud.

"Stay right here," Hauksberg said. "Not a step, understand?" His gun came free. He edged from the chamber, keeping Flandry in sight, and went to the phone. "Hm. Turned off, eh?" He flipped the switch. "Lord Oliveria."

Silence lay thick while the phone hunted through its various scanner outlets. The screen flickered, the ambassador looked forth "Hauksberg! What the devil?"

"Just returned," said the viscount. "We heard of an attempt to rifle Premier Brechdan's files. May have been a successful attempt too; and the agent escaped.

The premier accused me of havin' a finger in it. Obvious thought. Somebody wants to sabotage my mission,"

"I—" Oliveria collected himself. "Not necessarily. Terra isn't the only rival Merseia has."

"So I pointed out. Prepare to do likewise at length when you're notified officially. But we've got to show good faith. I've deputed the Merseians to arrest Commander Abrams. He'll be fetched back here. Place him under guard."

"Lord Hauksberg! He's an Imperial officer, and accredited to the diplomatic corps."

"He'll be detained by Terrans. By virtue of my commission from his Majesty, I'm assumin' command. No back talk if you don't want to be relieved of your position."

Oliveira whitened but bowed. "Very good, my lord. I must ask for this in properly recorded form."

"You'll have it when I get the chance. Next, this young fella Flandry, Abrams' assistant. Happens I've got him on deck. Think I'll quiz him a while myself. But have a couple of men march him to detention when I give the word. Meanwhile, alert your staff, start preparin' plans, explanations, and disclaimers, and stand by for a visit from Brechdan's foreign office."

Hauksberg cut the circuit. "E-

nough," he said. "C'mon out and start talkin', you."

Flandry went. Nightmare hammered at him. In the back of his head ran the thought: *Abrams was right. You don't really want drama in these things.*

*What'll happen to him?*

*To me? To Persis? To Terra?*

"Sit down." Hauksberg pointed his gun at a lounge and swung the barrel back at once. With his free hand he pulled a flat case from his tunic pocket. He appeared a little relaxed; had he begun to enjoy the tableau?

Flandry lowered himself. *Psychological disadvantage. looking upward. Yes. we underestimated his Lordship badly.* Persis stood in the archway, red-eyed, hugging herself and gulping.

Hauksberg flipped open the case—an unruly part of Flandry noticed how the chased silver shone beneath the fluoroceiling—and stuck a cheroot between his teeth. "What's your role in this performance?" he asked.

"Nothing, my lord," Flandry stammered. "I don't know—I mean, if, if I were concerned, would I have been here tonight?"

"Might." Hauksberg returned the case and extracted a lighter. His glance flickered to Persis. "What about you, m' love?"

"I don't know anything," she whispered. "And neither does he. I swear it."

"Inclined to b'lieve you." the lighter scrittled and flared. "In this case, though, you've been rather cynic'lly used."

"He wouldn't!"

"Hm." Hauksberg dropped the lighter on a table and blew smoke from his nostrils. "Could be you both were duped. 'We'll find that out when Abrams is probed.'"

"You can't!" Flandry shouted. "He's an officer!"

"They certainly can on Terra, my boy. I'd order it done this very hour, and risk the repercussions, if we had the equipment. 'Course, the Merseians do. If necessary, I'll risk a much bigger blowback and turn him over to them. My mission's too important for legal pettifoggin'. You might save the lot of us a deal of grief by tellin' all, Ensign. If your testimony goes to prove we Terrans are not involved—d' you see?"

*Give him a story. any story. whatever gets you away.* Flandry's brain was frozen. "How could we have arranged the job?" he fumbled. "You saw what kind of surveillance we've been under."

"Ever hear about agents provocateurs? I never believed Abrams came along for a ride." Hauksberg switched the phone to Record. "Begin at the beginnin', continue to the end, and stop. Why'd Abrams co-opt you in the first place?"

"Well, I, that is, he needed an aide." *"What actually did happen? Everything was so gradual. Step by step. I never really did decide to go into Intelligence. But somehow, here I am."*

Persis squared her shoulders. "Dominic had proven himself on Starkad," she said wretchedly. "Fighting for the Empire."

"Fine sonorous phrase." Hauksberg tapped the ash from his cheroot. "Are you really infatuated with this lout? No matter. P'rhaps you can see anyhow that I'm workin' for the Empire myself. Work sounds less romantic than fight, but's a bit more useful in the long haul, eh? Go on, Flandry. What'd Abrams tell you he meant to accomplish?"

"He...he hoped to learn things. He never denied that. But spying, no. He's not so stupid, my lord." *He's simply been outwitted.* "I ask you, how could he arrange trouble?"

"Leave the questions to me. When'd you first get together with Persis, and why?"

"We—I—" Seeing the anguish upon her, Flandry knew in full what it meant to make an implement of a sentient being. "My fault. Don't listen to her."

The door opened. There was no more warning than when Hauksberg had entered. But the thing which glided through, surely the lock was not keyed to that!

Persis shrieked. Hauksberg

sprang back with an oath. The thing, seared and twisted metal, blood starting afresh from the cauterized fragment of an arm, skin drawn tight and gray across bones in what was left of a face, rattled to the floor.

"Ensign Flandry," it called. The voice had volume yet, but no control, wavering across the scale and wholly without tone. Light came and went in the scanners which were eyes.

Flandry's jaws locked. Abrams' agent? Abrams' hope, wrecked and dying at his feet?

"Go on," Hauksberg breathed. The blaster crouched in his fist. "Talk to him."

Flandry shook his head till the sweat-drenched hair flew.

"Talk, I say," Hauksberg commanded. "Or I'll kill you and most surely give Abrams to the Merseians."

The creature which lay and bled before the now shut main door did not seem to notice. "Ensign Flandry. Which one is you? Hurry. *Meshuggah*. He told me to say *meshuggah*."

Flandry moved without thinking, from his lounge, down on his knees in the blood. "I'm here," he whispered.

"Listen." the head rolled, the eyes flickered more and more dimly, a servomotor rattled dry bearings inside the broken shell. "Memorize. In the Starkad file, these numbers."

As they coughed forth, one after the next in the duodecimals of Eriau, Flandry's training reacted. He need not understand, and did not; he asked for no repetitions; each phoneme was burned into his brain.

"Is that everything?" he asked with someone else's throat.

"Aye. The whole." A hand of metal tendrils groped until he clasped it. "Will you remember my name? I was Dwyr of Tanis, once called the Merry. They made me into this. I was planted in your airboat. Commander Abrams sent me. That is why he left this place, to release me unobserved. But an alarm order was on the Starkad reel. I was ruined in escaping. I would have come sooner to you but I kept fainting. You must phone for the boat and ...escape, I think. Remember Dwyr."

"We will always remember."

"Good. Now let me die. If you open the main plate you can turn off my heart." The words wobbled insanely, but they were clear enough. "I cannot hold Sivilla long in my brain. It is poisoned and oxygen starved. The cells are going out, one by one. Turn off my heart."

Flandry disengaged the tendrils around his hand and reached for the hinged plate. He didn't see very well, nor could he smell the oil and scorched insulation.

"Hold off," Hauksberg said.

Flandry didn't hear him. Hauksberg stepped close and kicked him. "Get away from there, I say. We want him alive."

Flandry lurched erect. "You can't."

"Can and will." Hauksberg's lips were drawn back, his chest rose and fell, the cheroot had dropped from his mouth into the spreading blood. "Great Emperor! I see the whole thing. Abrams had this double agent. He'd get the information, it'd be passed on to you, and you'd go home in disgrace when I caught you with Persis." He took a moment to give the girl a look of triumph. "You follow, my dear? You were nothin' but an object."

She strained away from them, one hand to her mouth, the other fending off the world. "Sivilla, Sivilla," came from the floor. "Oh, hurry!"

Hauksberg backed toward the phone. "Well call a medic. I think if we're fast we can save this chap."

"But don't you understand?" Flandry implored. "Those numbers—there *is* something about Starkad—your mission never had a chance. We've got to let our people know!"

"Let me worry 'bout that," Hauksberg said. "You face a charge of treason."

"For trying to bail out the Empire?"

"For tryin' to sabotage an offi-

cial delegation. Tryin' to make your own policy, you and Abrams. Think you're his Majesty? You'll learn better." Flandry took a step forward. The gun jerked. "Stand back! Soon blast you as not, y'know." Hauksberg's free hand reached for the phone.

Flandry stood over Dwyr, in a private Judgment Day.

Persis ran across the floor. "Mark, no!"

"Get away." Hauksberg held his gun on the boy.

Persis flung her arms around him. Suddenly her hands closed on his right wrist. She threw herself down, dragging the blaster with her. "Nicky!" she screamed.

Flandry sprang. Hauksberg hit Persis with his fist. She took the blow on her skull and hung on. Flandry arrived. Hauksberg struck at him. Flandry batted the hand aside with one arm. His other, stiff-fingered, drove into the solar plexus. Hauksberg doubled. Flandry chopped him behind the ear. He fell in a heap.

Flandry scooped up the blaster and punched the phone controls. "Airboat to Embassy," he ordered in Eriau.

Turning, he strode back to Dwyr, knelt, and opened the frontal plate. Was this the switch he wanted? He undid its safety lock. "Goodbye, my friend," he said.

"One moment," wavered from the machine. "I lost her. So much darkness. Noise... Now."

Flandry pulled the switch. The lights went out in the eyes and Dwyr lay still.

Persis sprawled by Hauksberg, shaken with crying. Flandry returned and raised her. "I'll have to make a dash," he said. "Might not finish it. Do you want to come?"

She clung to him. "Yes, yes, yes. They'd have killed you."

He embraced her one-armed, his other hand holding the blaster on Hauksberg, who stirred and choked. Wonderbroke upon him like morning. "Why did you help me?" he asked low.

"I don't know. Take me away from here!"

"Well...you may have done something great for the human race. If that information really is important. It has to be. Go put on a dress and shoes. Comb your hair. Find me a clean pair of pants. There are all bloody. Be quick." She gripped him tighter and sobbed. He slapped her. "Quick, I said! Or I'll have to leave you behind."

She ran. He nudged Hauksberg with his foot. "Up, my lord."

Hauksberg crawled to a stance. "You're crazy," he gasped. "Do you seriously expect to escape?"

"I seriously expect to try. Give me that holster belt." Flanders clipped it on. "We'll walk to the boat. If anyone asks, you're satisfied with my story, I've given you news which can't wait, and we're

off to report in person to the Merseian authorities. At the first sign of trouble, I'll start shooting my way through, and you'll get the first bolt. Clear?"

Hauksberg rubbed the bruise behind his ear and glared.

With action upon him, Flandry lost every doubt. Adrenalin sang in his veins. Never had he perceived more sharply—this over-elegant room, the bloodshot eyes in front of him, the lovely sway of Persis re-entering in a fire-red gown, odors of sweat and anger, sigh of a ventilator, heat in his skin, muscle sliding across muscle, the angle of his elbow where he aimed the gun, by eternity, he was alive!

Having changed pants, he said, "Out we go. You first, my lord. Me a pace behind, as fits my rank. Persis next to you. Watch his face, darling. He might try to signal with it. If he blows a distress rocket from his nose, tell me and I'll kill him."

Her lips trembled. "No. You can't do that. Not to Mark."

"He'd've done it to me. We're committed, and not to any very genteel game. If he behaves himself he'll live, maybe. March."

As they left, Flandry saluted that which lay on the floor.

But he did not forget to screen the view of it with his body on his way out to the corridor, until the door shut behind him. Around a corner, they met a couple of

young staffmen headed in their direction. "Is everything well, my lord?" one asked. Flandry's fingers twitched near his sheathed gun. He cleared his throat loudly.

Hauksberg nodded. "Bound for Afon," he said. "Immediately. With those people."

"Confidential material in the suite," Flandry added. "Don't go in, and make sure nobody else does."

They were stopped again in the lobby and again got past on words. Outside, the garden lay aflash with dew under Lythyr and a sickle Neihevin. The air was cool. It quivered with distant machine sounds. Abrams' speedster had arrived. *O God, I have to leave him behind!* It sat on the parking strip, door open. Flandry urged Hauksberg and Persis aboard. He closed the door and waved on the lights. "Sit down at the console," he ordered his prisoner. "Persis, bring a towel from the head. My lord, we're about to talk our way through the security cordon. Will they believe we're harmlessly bound for Dhan-godhan?"

Hauksberg's face contorted. "When Brechdan is here? Don't be ridiculous. C'mon, end the comedy, surrender and make things easier for yourself."

"Well, we'll do it the hard way. When we're challenged, tell 'em we're headed back to your ship to fetch some stuff we need to show

Brechdan in connection with this episode."

"D'you dream they'll swallow that?"

"I think they might. Merseians aren't as rule-bound as Terrans. To them, it's in character for a boss noble to act on his own, without filing twenty different certificates first. If they don't believe us, I'll cut out the safety locks and ram a flier of theirs; so be good." Persis gave Flandry the towel. "I'm going to tie your hands. Cooperate or I'll slug you."

He grew conscious, then, of what power meant, how it worked. You kept the initiative. The other fellow's instinct was to obey, unless he was trained in self-mastery. But you dared not slack off the pressure for a second. Hauksberg slumped in his seat and gave no trouble.

"You won't hurt him, Nicky?" Persis begged.

"Not if I can avoid it. Haven't we troubles enough?" Flandry took the manual-pilot chair. The boat swung aloft.

A buzz came from the console. Flandry closed that circuit. A uniformed Merseian looked from the vidscreen. He could see nothing but their upper bodies. "Halt!" he ordered. "Security."

Flandry nudged Hauksberg. The viscount said, "Ah...we must go to my ship—" No human would have accepted a tale so

lamely delivered. Nor would a Merseian educated in the subtleties of human behavior. But this was merely an officer of planetary police, assigned here because he happened to be on duty at the time of the emergency. Flandry had counted on that.

"I shall check," said the green visage.

"Don't you realize?" Hauksberg snapped. "I am a diplomat. Escort us if you like. But you have no right to detain us. Move along, pilot."

Flandry gunned the gravs. The boat mounted. Ardaig fell away beneath, a glittering web, a spot of light. Tuning in the after view-screen, Flandry saw two black objects circle about and trail him. They were smaller than this vessel, but they were armed and armored.

"Nice work, there at the end, my lord," he said.

Hauksberg was rapidly regaining equilibrium. "You've done rather well yourself," he answered. "I begin to see why Abrams thinks you've potentialities."

"Thanks." Flandry concentrated on gaining speed. The counter-acceleration field was not quite in tune; he felt a tug of weight that, uncompensated, would have left him hardly able to breathe.

"But it won't tick, y'know," Hauksberg continued. "Messages are flyin' back and forth. Our



escort'll get an order to make us turn back."

"I trust not. If I were them, I'd remember that the *Queen Maggy* was declared harmless by her Merseian pilot. I'd alert my forces, but otherwise watch to see what you did. After all, Brechdan must be convinced you're sincere."

Ardaig was lost. Mountain tips gleamed in moonlight, and high plains, and cloud cover blanket-ing the planet in white. The wail of air grew thin and died. Stars trod forth, wintry clear.

"More I think about it," Hauksberg said, more I'd like to have you on the right side. Peace needs men worse'n war does."

"Let's establish peace first, huh?" Flandry's fingers rattled computer keys. As a matter of routine, he had memorized the six elements of the spaceship's orbit around Merseia. Perturbation wouldn't have made much difference yet.

"That's what I'm tryin' for. We can have it, I tell you. You've listened to that fanatic Abrams. Give me a turn."

"Sure." Flandry spoke with half his attention. "Start by explaining why Brechdan keeps secrets about Starkad."

"D'you imagine we've no secrets? Brechdan has to defend himself. If we let mutual fear and hate build up, of course we'll get the big war."

"If we let Terra be painted into a corner, I agree, my lord, the planet incinerators will fly."

"Ever look at it from the Merseian viewpoint?"

"I didn't say it's wise to leave them with no out but to try and destroy us." Flandry shrugged. That's for the statesmen, though, I'm told. I only work here. Please shut up and let me figure my approach curve."

Korych flamed over the edge of the world. That sunrise was gold and amethyst, beneath a million stars.

The communicator buzzed anew. "Foreseer," said a Merseian, "you may board your ship for a limited time provided we accompany you."

"Regret," Hauksberg said. "But quite impossible. I'm after material which is for the eyes of Protector Brechdan alone. You are welcome to board as soon as I have it in this boat, and escort me straight to Castle Afon."

"I shall convey the foreseeer's word to my superiors and relay their decision." Blankoff.

"You're wonderful," Persis said.

Hauksberg barked a laugh. "Don't fancy this impetuous young hero of yours includin' me in his Divine Wind dive." Seriously: "I s'pose you figure to escape in an auxiliary. Out of the question. Space patrol'll

overhaul you long before you can go hyper."

"Not if I go hyper right away," Flandry said.

"But—snakes alive, boy! You know what the concentration of matter is, this near a sun. If a microjump lands you by a pebble, even—"

"Chance we take. Odds favor us, especially if we head out normally to the ecliptic plane."

"You'll be in detection range for a light-year. A ship with more legs can run you down. And will."

"You won't be there," Flandry said. "Dog your hatch. I'm busy."

The minutes passed. He scarcely noticed when the call came, agreeing that Hauksberg's party might board alone. He did reconstruct the reasoning behind that agreement. *Dronning Margrete* was unarmed and empty. Two or three men could not start her up in less than hours. Long before then, warcraft would be on hand to blast her. Hauksberg must be honest. Let him have his way and see what he produced.

The great tapered clinder swam into sight. Flandry contacted the machines within and made rendezvous on instruments and trained senses. A boatlock gaped wide. He slid through. The lock closed, air rushed into the turret, he killed his motor and stood up. "I'll have to secure you, my lord," he said. "They'll find you when they enter."

Hauksberg regarded him. "You'll not reconsider?" he asked. "Terra shouldn't lose one like you."

"No. Sorry."

"Warn you, you'll be outlawed. I don't aim to sit idle and let you proceed. After what's happened, the best way I can show my bonafides is to cooperate with the Merseians in headin' you off."

Flandry touched his blaster. Hauksberg nodded. "You can delay matters a trifle by killin' me," he said.

"Have no fears. Persis, another three or four towels. Lie down on the deck, my lord."

Hauksberg did as he was told. Looking at the girl, he said: "Don't involve yourself. Stay with me. I'll tell 'em you were a prisoner too. Hate to waste women."

"They are in short supply hereabouts," Flandry agreed. "You'd better do it, Persis."

She stood quiet for a little. "Do you mean you forgive me, Mark?" she asked.

"Well, yes, Hauksberg said.

She bent and kissed him lightly. "I think I believe you. But no, thanks. I've made my choice."

"After the way your boy friend's treated you?"

"He had to. I have to believe that." Persis helped bind Hauksberg fast.

She and Flandry left the boat. The passageways glowed and

echoed as they trotted. They hadn't far to go until they entered another turret. The slim hull of a main auxiliary loomed over them. Flandry knew the model: A lovely thing, though and versatile, with fuel and supplies for a journey of several hundred parsecs. Swift, too; not that she could outpace a regular warcraft, but a stern chase is a long chase and he had some ideas about what to do if the enemy came near.

He made a quick check of systems. Back in the control room, he found Persis in the copilot's seat. "Will I bother you?" she asked timidly.

"Contrariwise," he said. "Keep silent, though, till we're in hyper-drive."

"I will," she promised. "I'm not a complete null, Nicky. You learn how to survive when you're a low-caste dancer. Different from space, of course. But this is the first time I've done anything for anyone but myself. Feels good. Scary, yes, but good."

He ran a hand across the tangled dark hair, smooth cheek and delicate profile, until his fingers tilted her chin and he bestowed his own kiss on her. "Thanks more'n I can say," he murmured. "I was doing this mainly on account of Max Abrams. It'd have been cold, riding alone with his ghost. Now I've got you to live for."

He seated himself. At his touch, the engine woke. "Here we go,"

he said almost cheerfully.

## Chapter VIII

Stars crowded the viewscreens, unmercifully brilliant against infinite night. The spaceboat thrummed with her haste.

Flandry and Persis returned from their labor. She had been giving him tools, meals, anything she could that seemed to fit his request, "Just keep feeding me and fanning me." In a shapeless coverall, hair caught under a scarf, a smear of grease on her nose, she was somehow more desirable than ever before. Or was that simply because death coursed near?

The Merseian destroyer had called the demand to stop long ago, an age ago, when she pulled within range of a hypervibration 'cast. Flandry refused. "Then prepare your minds for the God," said her captain, and cut off. Moment by moment, hour by hour, he had crept in on the boat, until instruments shouted his presence.

Persis caught Flandry's hand. Her own touch was cold. "I don't understand," she said in a thin voice. "You told me he can track us by our wake. But space is so big. Why can't we go sublight and let him hunt for us?"

"He's too close," Flandry said. "He was already too close when we first knew he was on our trail.

If we cut the secondaries, he'd have a pretty good idea of our location, and need only cast about a small volume of space till he picked up the neutrino emission of our powerplant."

"Couldn't we turn that off too?"

"We'd die inside a day. Everything depends on it. Odds-on bet whether we suffocated or froze. If we had suspended-animation equipment—But we don't. This is no warcraft, not even an exploratory vessel. It's just the biggest lifeboat-cum-gig *Queen Maggy* could tote."

They moved toward the control room. "What's going to happen?" she asked.

"In theory, you mean?" He was grateful for a chance to talk. The alternative would have been that silence which pressed in on the hull. "Well, look. We travel faster than light by making a great many quantum jumps per second, which don't cross the intervening space. You might say we're not in the real universe most of the time, though we are so often that we can't notice any difference. Our friend has to phase in. That is, he has to adjust his jumps to the same frequency and the same phase angle as ours. This makes each ship a completely solid object to the other, as if they were moving sublight, under ordinary gravitic drive at a true velocity."

"But what about the field?"

"Oh, that. Well, what makes us quantum-jump is a pulsating force-field generated by the secondary engine. The field encloses us and reaches out through a certain radius. How big a radius and how much mass it can affect, depends on the generator's power. A big ship can lay alongside a smaller one and envelop her and literally drag her at a resultant pseudospeed. Which is how you carry out most capture and boarding operations. But a destroyer isn't that large in relation to us. She does have to come so close that our fields overlap. Otherwise her beams and artillery can't touch us."

"Why don't we change phase?"

"Standard procedure is an engagement. I'm sure our friends expect us to try it. But one party can change as fast as another, and runs a continuous computation to predict the pattern of the opposition's maneuvers. Sooner or later, the two will be back in phase long enough for a weapon to hit. We're not set up to do it nearly as well as he is. No, our solitary chance is the thing we've been working on."

She pressed against him. He felt how she trembled. "Nicky, I'm afraid."

"Think I'm not?" Both pairs of lips were dry when they touched. "Come on, let's go to our posts. We'll know in a few min-

utes. If we go out—Persis, I couldn't ask for a better traveling companion." As they sat down, Flandry added, because he dared not stay serious: "Thought we wouldn't be together long. You're ticketed for heaven, my destination's doubtless the other way."

She gripped his hand again. "Mine too. You won't escape me th-th-that easily."

Alarms blared. A shadow crossed the stars. It thickened as phasing improved. Now it was a torpedo outline, still transparent; now the gun turrets and missile launchers showed clear; now all but the brightest stars were occulted. Flandry laid an eye to the crosshairs of his improvised fire-control scope. His finger rested on a button. Wires ran aft from it.

The destroyer edged nearer, swelling in the screens. She moved leisurely, knowing her prey was weaponless, alert only for evasive tactics. Flandry's right hand went to the drive controls. So...so...he was zeroed a trifle forward of the section where he knew her engines must be.

A gauge flickered. Hyperfields were making their first tenuous contact. In a second it would be sufficiently firm for a missile or a firebolt to cross from one hull to another. Persis, reading the board as he had taught her, yelled, "Go!"

Flandry snapped on a braking vector. Lacking the instruments

and computers of a man-of-war, he had estimated for himself what the thrust should be. He pressed the button.

In the screen, the destroyer shot forward in relation to him. From an open hatch in his boat plunged the auxiliary's auxiliary, a craft meant for atmosphere but propellable anywhere on gravity beams. Field joined almost at the instant it transmitted them. At high relative velocity, both pseudo and kinetic, it smote.

Flandry did not see what happened. He had shifted phase immediately, and concentrated on getting the hell out of the neighborhood. If everything worked as hoped, his airboat would rip through the Merseian plates, ruinously at kilometers per second. Fragments, engine connections—flesh—would howl in air. Of course, the destroyoer wouldn't be destroyed. Repair would be possible, after so feeble a blow. But before the ship was operational again, he would be outside detection range. If he zig-zagged, he would scarcely be findable.

He hurtled among the stars. A clock counted one minute, two, three, five. He began to stop fighting for breath. Persis gave way to tears. After ten minutes he felt free to run on automatic, lean over and hold her.

"We did it," he whispered. "Satan in Sirius! One miserable gig

*(Continued on page 124)*

# THE SPACE WITCH

## WALTER M. MILLER, JR.

Illustrated by VALIGURSKY



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*To our knowledge Walter M. Miller, Jr. hasn't done any new stories for quite a while now, but that hasn't stopped his reputation from growing like Topsy. Of course, that's primarily due to the Hugo-winning Canticle for Leibowitz, but it's also partly due to some superb shorter work like "Secret of the Death Dome" and "Six and Ten Are Johnny," both of which you've seen in recent issues of Amazing and Fantastic. And now, with "The Space Witch"—a very strong yarn about a foreign correspondent on vacation, a divorcee teetering between her first and second husbands, and a strange black cloud out of space—we think Miller's reputation will be going up at least one notch higher.*

**K**ENNETH Johnson had heard the Kalawego "black cloud" reports, but he wasn't much concerned about them. He was in fact grateful that they had frightened the price of real estate toward rock bottom. After three years in Europe as a news correspondent, he had returned to buy himself a summer cottage on Kalawego Lake, and prepared for a well-deserved month of fishing along its rocky banks. If the black cloud appeared, he promised himself, he'd have a camera handy. For although he was not disturbed, he believed that the witnesses had actually seen something or other, and Ken regarded himself as skilled in judging the reliability of witnesses.

The phenomenon appeared on the third day of his vacation, but the camera was not immediately at hand.

The sun had fallen behind the high hill, and the cabin lay in afternoon shade. Ken sat with his feet on the porch rail watching the breeze-swept lake, and cursing himself for having invited the two guests who now sat on the steps in their bathing suits and tried to make light conversation about the races and nightlife and the New York stage, while they sucked at the lips of a pair of paper cups. Marcia was slightly drunk, her eyes too wandering, and her laughter too throaty. She kept patting the man's bare knee as pun-

tuation for her long and parenthetically explanatory sentences.

They had brought their own liquor and Ken glanced at it with a sniff. It sat in the center of the porch—a bucket of ice, a fifth of gin, a fifth of vermouth, a bottle of olives, and a silver shaker. Quite fancy, Ken thought, for an open-air weekend at a ramshackle cabin on remote Kalawego Lake. But then, having been married to Marcia once, he knew that she liked to carry her sophistication with her wherever she went. Her present husband, whose dark and narrow eyes never ceased devouring each part of her bared brown body, was part of her sophistication. He grinned sensually at everything she said, and placed his eyes wherever she directed them by her casually calculated posings.

Ken seldom looked at her, except when she turned to ask him a question or make some remark about "old times". He remembered the old times too well, and the memories hurt more than he cared to admit even to himself. Marcia's tanned skin, the soft smooth curves of her body, her quick moist lips, and the jiggling mass of rich brown hair flicking this way and that with each movement of her head. Ken could still remember the clutching possessiveness of her during the honeymoon, and his own voice muttering, "My little girl, my little girl."



Yeah. He'd been in Europe three months when she wrote that she wanted the divorce—in favor of this sleek-mannered lap dog with the dark masculine beauty and the wandering eyes.

Ken, in bitter irony, had invited them for the weekend as a way of saying "who cares?" He had figured that Marcia would want to accept, thereby demonstrating to her friends the extent of her sophistication, but he had imagined that the lap dog, Phillip, would have enough pride to refuse. Evidently Phillip had no will of his own, for he seemed not in the least embarrassed in the presence of the man who'd known the body he was admiring long before he had entered the picture.

Ken's only satisfaction as he sat listening to them, was in the realization that Marcia was drinking herself tipsy and doing her best to prove that Phillip was her slave. She treated him with mingled contempt and motherly affection. And Ken remembered that she seldom overdrank—except when deeply disturbed. It was small consolation, however. For to his dismay, he found his old longing and love and desire suddenly re-aroused. Instead of hating her, he found himself hating the attentive Phillip, with the kind of hate that sits and nurses thoughts of hard fists bruising a pretty face.

Suddenly Marcia's voice shook

him from gloomy reverie. "Ken? Ken! Is that one of those black clouds?"

He looked up quickly, searching the sky where she pointed. Phillip was standing up and staring with his mouth open. "Oops! It's gone," he said suddenly, then hopped down the steps to look again.

Ken saw nothing. The breeze had grown gusty, and there were a few flakes of alto-cumulus toward the horizon, but the sky was otherwise blue.

"It was there! I swear it was there!" said Marcia.

Phillip walked a dozen steps from the porch to peer up through a clear place in the branches. "There it went again!" he shouted. "A black flash and then it was gone!" Suddenly he was running toward the lake.

Marcia sat down and sipped her drink thoughtfully while she stared after her husband. The excitement went out of her face like a switched-off light. Then she looked at Ken. He returned her gaze evenly, coolly, expecting her to make some inane remark. But her large brown eyes stared into his with a calm frankness and unsmiling intimacy. He tried to look away, but couldn't. "Well, Ken?" she breathed quietly.

It was their first moment alone together. She was not sitting in the slumped comfort of relaxation, but in slightly tense erectness,

leaning toward him, lips parted, posing a pose that demonstrated the length of her shapely legs, and the even flare of her hips, and the budding swell of her breasts.

"Well, Ken?"

"You didn't see anything at all, did you?" he murmured in chilly fascination.

He could see by her hesitation that she wanted to say "no", but instead she shrugged, smiled cynically toward the distant figure of her husband, looked back at Ken with lifted brows, and said, "I did see it, darling, but so what?"

He recognized the question and the invitation in her eyes. For a moment he struggled with himself. She wrinkled her nose, winked, and knocked over the gin bottle with a small and deliberate push. The liquor splashed across the porch, and the bottle rolled down the steps to shatter on the stone walkway. "What a shame," she murmured thoughtfully. "Now poor Phillip will have to make a trip to town for more."

Ken shuddered and stood up. "I better get my camera," he mumbled. "That cloud you saw might come back."

He moved into the house, found the camera, and glanced at its film-window. He had forgotten to load it. He was threading the paper tip through the roller when her bare feet tiptoed up behind him. He kept on loading the cam-

era, feeling the dull anxiety of self-loathing. She was standing a few inches in back of him, her shadow across his shoulder. She neither spoke nor touched him, but he could feel her warmth, hear her breathing, smell the faint perfume of her breath. His fingers were nervous with the film.

"Got a cigaret, Ken?" she asked in a small subdued voice.

Silently he handed her his pack over his shoulder, without looking around. But she didn't take them.

"Light it for me, Ken."

He put the camera down, lit the cigaret, and turned, offering it to her. She kept her hands at her sides, and took it from his fingers with her lips, eyeing him questioningly. He wiped a trace of lipstick from his fingernail while he stared at her.

"Not satisfied with what you've got?" He meant to make it insulting, but his voice was hoarse.

"Not at the moment," she breathed amid an exhaled aura of smoke, and her eyes fell speculatively to his shirt-throat where a patch of yellow fur lay in view. Then she stirred it absently with her forefinger while she watched his eyes. "Phillip has his advantages, but then—you have your advantages too."

Ken choked a curse in her face and slapped her hand away from his throat. But her sudden laughter kept him from stalking away in

rage. With grim horror, he realized that he wanted her back—almost at any price.

"You're a man, Ken. I need a man once in a while. Phillip's—"

He slapped her brutally, leaving bright finger-welts across her cheek. She caught her breath, put her palm against her face, but continued speaking, almost without interruption.

"—not always a comforting pet. His lovemaking is highly specialized."

Ken seized the camera and jostled roughly past her. He lumbered toward the door with a sick knot in the pit of his stomach. Suddenly he realized that something was wrong. The light was gloomy outside, and the wind was wailing about the eaves.

Then he heard someone screaming in the distance. He broke into a run, and burst onto the porch. Phillip was racing up the trail and howling with fright, bending far forward against the sudden gale. A patch of darkness hung over the lake, beyond the branches in front of the cottage. It obscured the sunlight on the water.

"It came at me!" Phillip was shrieking. "It tried to get me!"

Ken leaped into the yard and dashed toward an opening in the trees, angling for a clear shot of the strange meteorological phenomenon. But before he reached it, the cloud winked away, as if it

had never been there, leaving a clear blue sky, dulling with late afternoon's haze. There was a brief grumble of faint thunder. The wind stopped, reversed itself for a moment, then stopped again.

Phillip was chattering excitedly to his wife on the porch. Ken turned disgustedly and shuffled toward them, staring disconsolately at the ground while listening to their voices.

"...really, Phil, that's no reason to pull up your skirts and shriek as if you'd seen a mouse or something!"

"But I tell you, Marsh! It tried to..." His voice tapered off as he heard his host approaching. He slumped to the porch rail, his hands trembling slightly. "Whew!" he breathed. "I need a drink."

Ken spat on the walk, then sat on the bottom step and stared at the lake. Their voices went on behind him.

"Well, there isn't any, Phil. I broke the bottle. You'll have to drive in for another."

"I've got a bottle of bourbon," Ken said without looking around, "if you can stand it."

"I could use it," Phillip admitted.

"All right, darling," Marcia said. "Sit still and I'll get you a drink. Where do you keep your liquor, Ken?"

"Kitchen shelf," he admitted in amazement, then regretted it im-

mediately. But Marcia slipped into the house without another word.

She called to him faintly from the kitchen. "You just thought you had some, Ken."

He stiffened and cursed inwardly. "There's a full bottle!" he bellowed. Then he turned as her footsteps approached through the hall.

She stood behind the screen waving an empty fifth at him and smiling. Her eyes mocked him, daring him to accuse her of pouring it down the sink which, he knew, was exactly what she'd done. "You don't remember your last binge very well, I guess," she said, then eyed her husband. "I could use one too, Phil."

Phillip slipped off the rail and sighed. "Well, let's drive in after another. I'm sure Kenneth won't mind being left alone for an hour or so."

"I'm not going." Marcia said flatly. They locked glances for a moment, and when he made no move to leave, she added, "Afraid a black cloud'll chase you? Or are you afraid something'll happen while you're gone?"

"Really, Marcia!"

"Oh, I'll go with you, if you're afraid, Phil."

"That won't be necessary." he replied stiffly, and brushed past her into the house. "Excuse me while I get out of this bathing suit."

Ken sat still staring at the lake's reflection of approaching twilight, and wishing fervently that he'd never left Europe. Coming back to this sort of decadence, and becoming a part of it, was hardly the answer to his dreams of home. He despised himself for still loving the evil creature who stood watching him from the doorway. Why didn't he tell them both to get out?—To go, and leave him completely alone. Why didn't he go tell the lap dog that his mistress was scheming to send him away—"Look, Phillsy-boy, your missus is getting fresh with me."

But then, after all, if he hadn't taken the European assignment, Marcia would never have left him. He remembered the way she'd begged him not to go, and fumed at how he couldn't love her if he left that way. And Ken had said, "Look, babe, it's only for six months." And he'd laughed when she threatened to be deliberately unfaithful. Then, after three months, the letter—and the bitterness that made him stay three years.

What if he had come back then? When the letter came, asking for a divorce. Maybe the letter had been intended to bring him back. He'd thought about it before. Marcia did things like that sometimes. But when he said, "Get it and be damned. I'm staying three years," she got it anyway.

Maybe some of the mess was his fault. A sensible woman could have waited six months in the interest of her husband's job; but Marcia wasn't a sensible woman, and he had known it when he married her. She was selfish and high-strung and possessive—and now she was something else too—something that wasn't quite healthy. Still, he loved her, and wished she'd go away. Inviting her had been the worst kind of mistake.

He heard Phillip leave by the back door, slamming the screen petulantly. Marcia was humming a nerve-wracking tune in the doorway. A starter growled behind the house, then Phillip's car roared away up the narrow road. There was a moment of stillness; the only sound was the rustle of sparrows fluttering in the brush. The lake was mirror-calm in the dusk.

The screen door spring creaked behind him, and Marcia's bare feet padded across the porch. She sat silently on the step above him and hung one foot on either side. Then he felt her hands on his shoulders, lightly. And she placed her forehead against the back of his neck.

"I was a little tight, Ken. It's wearing off."

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry, Ken. But if I hadn't been tight, I'd have done it anyway. I'd just have been nicer about it, that's all."

"Trying to reset the stage now?" he growled.

"Yes...yes, Ken. To reset the whole darn thing. From the beginning. I shouldn't have tried to own you so hard, should I? You don't own easy."

"Phillip does. And apparently you like it."

For a while she said nothing, then, "Do me a favor, Ken. Love me. Just for now. Then I'll leave you alone. I couldn't go back to you, even though I still love you. You wouldn't take me anyway, but right now—"

"Stop babbling!" he snapped. Then he walked away from her, leaving her on the steps and moving down the trail toward the dock. He shivered at the damp touch of his shirt collar; it was soggy with her tears.

He wanted her. But to take her would be to come back again... and again...and finally he'd be helpless. That's the way she wanted him, helpless. She wasn't aware of it, of course. Love? Maybe, if she were capable of it, but she wanted him helpless.

He walked out on the dock and stared across the five-mile expanse of gray water in the gloom. Crickets were chirruping along the banks, and he heard a deer tearing through the brush to reach the shore. It was, he thought, a good place to be standing when Phillip came back. He stole a cautious glance toward

the porch, half-expecting to see Marcia approaching. But she was nowhere in sight. Maybe she's coming to her senses, he thought .....but he doubted it.

Ten minutes later he heard her coming down the path to the dock. When her high heels clattered on the loose boards, he glanced back in surprise; she had shed the bathing suit and was fully dressed in a bright print skirt and white blouse. She was smiling crisply, but her eyes were hard, determined. They mocked him.

"My face is bruised where you slapped me, Ken."

"Sorry. You know I'm short on temper."

"Phil didn't see it. I kept my face turned. But he'll see it when he comes back." She stood facing him, smiling up at him coldly.

"What're you driving at."

Suddenly her hand lashed out like a striking rattler, and he felt her sharp nails rake down his cheek in a quick sear of pain. He recoiled, leaned against a dock piling, and stared at her.

"He'll see that too, Ken. Watch it; it's bleeding on your shirt."

He stood transfixed, remembering the shotgun in Phillip's car, and the crazy jealousy of men who allowed themselves to be owned by a woman. A stiff breeze was springing up, but he scarcely noticed it. Marcia glanced at the sky.

"There's the cloud again, in case you're interested." Her tone im-

plied that she was not. She looked down at herself, then seized the front of her blouse and ripped it, tearing a long rent from shoulder to waist. "He won't like this either, Ken."

But Ken was staring up at the sky in dismay. A swirling globe of dark gray mist hovered a thousand feet over the lake—like the spent smoke of a mighty ack-ack burst. Meanwhile, Marcia was still preparing her revenge.

"Look at the way you've messed up my hair, Ken. And my lipstick. Phil will be furious. If he doesn't kill you, I'm sure he'll go for the police."

Caught impotent between the strange cloud and the woman's wrath, he stood speechless, while the howling wind sucked at his shirt and washed about his burning cheek. Marcia turned suddenly and began running along the dock toward shore. Helplessly, he glanced at the cloud. It was growing blacker in the gray sky of dusk. And settling lower. Then he saw that the wind was rushing toward it from all directions. The trees on the opposite shore were bending lakeward.

The birth of a twister?

He turned to follow Marcia. With an explosive crack, a dead tree limb broke loose and fell just ahead of her, carried along the dock by the gale. She leaped over it, tripped, and sprawled full length across the boards. "My

ankle!" she wailed above the wind's wail.

He raced toward her, fighting the wind, and pausing to heave the limb from the dock. Her shoe was off, the high heel wedged in a crack between the boards; and she was moaning with pain as he knelt beside her.

"Can you stand?" he shouted.

She started to her feet, but fell back with a cry. The ankle was twisted askew. He lifted her in his arms but found it impossible to carry her against the hurricane force that was tearing debris from the shore and hurling it out over the angry waves. He sank to his knees again and laid her on the dock, but she clung fiercely to his neck, shrieking with fright. "Don't leave me here, for God's sake, Ken!"

He saw what she was thinking. It would look like an accident, and for an instant he was tempted to go on alone. But the arms were the arms of a child clinging to her father, and wasn't that the meaning of insanity—being a child when one had no right to be a child? He pressed his mouth against her ear.

"Let go, babe! I won't leave you."

"You love me, Ken? Say you love me!" She was still screaming, and her eyes were wild, her lips parted hungrily.

"Yeah, sure, kid."

She let go of him then. They

were lying stretched out full length on the boards but still the wind tugged them menacingly. The dock was quaking and groaning under the force.

"It's going to collapse, Ken. I can feel it. Look at the pilings..."

Almost as she spoke the outer end of the dock twisted aside, splintered and crashed into the storm that bore them away across the water.

"The boat!" he shouted. "Into the boat!" he scrambled to a near-by piling and began winding in the mooring rope of his small fishing craft. The boat was metal, but there were sealed air-tanks in the prow and stern which would keep it afloat if it capsized in the wave-tossed lake.

"I can't make it, Ken! My ankle!"

He seized the piling, swung himself down, and dropped sprawling into the tossing craft. "Roll to the edge! I'll catch you."

Clinging to the piling with one hand, he lurched to his feet and seized her about the waist as she came hurtling over the edge of the platform. They fell in a tangle into the wobbling boat, rocking it dangerously. There were several inches of water in the bottom. He shook off her clutching hands, crawled to the prow, and sawed at the rope with his pocketknife. "Start bailing her out!" he howled. "There's a can somewhere!"

Faintly, he heard her scraping at the bottom and sloshing water over the side. Then the half-severed rope snapped free, and the wind whisked the boat away from the sagging dock. He threw himself down and crawled back to Marcia. She had lost the bailing can in the wind, and she was sobbing plaintively.

"Don't be scared, kid! If we tip over, hang onto the swivel rings—on the sides of the boat!"

She caught him down beside her, "I'm not scared, Ken. Just sorry! God, I'm sorry!"

He glanced quickly at the cloud. It had fallen toward the lake, and it hovered fifty feet above the water—a pitch-black patch of—

"Marsh!" he howled. "There're stars in it! It's not a cloud at all."

But she was still shrieking at him that she was sorry! He stared at the black globe of emptiness. There were stars glittering beyond it—where the opposite hillside should have been. A piece torn out of space! A dark tunnel into the void! The wind was pouring through it into nothingness. The gloom of evening was lightened by contrast with the awful hole.

The boat was pitching among the white-capped waves, but as they raced with the wind, the force of the gale lessened slightly.

He heard Marcia praying. She was speaking to him, but still it was a prayer. The evil mask stripped away, she was a child, clinging to him. "Don't leave me, Ken! You left me once, and I was lost. Don't leave me again. Why didn't you come back?"

When? When she'd asked for the divorce? Maybe he would have—if she'd made it conditional. But he was no whipped puppy to come begging. That's what she wanted—or thought she wanted. But if he had come back, he'd have lost his pride; and now he'd be another Phil. No, not quite, but almost.

"Answer me, Ken! Was there another woman? Over there? In Europe?"

He looked down into her frightened face and shook his head slowly. After what she'd done, she could still ask a thing like that. Marcia. Marcia. Not sane, neither was she insane. He saw her mind tightly locked in a vault of self. Desperately, she was trying to open it to him, but the hinges were rusty. But she was still his wife; her eyes told him so. No red tape nor official pronouncements by the courts could change that.

The boat was moving faster, but the waves had diminished. He looked at the globe-gap and saw the cause. It had settled until a segment of its base lay beneath



the water, and the lake was pouring toward it like a river over the brink of a waterfall. They were a thousand yards away and soon, he thought, they would be plunging through the emptiness.

"It was Phil's fault!" she cried. "He used to tell me about the girls in Europe. He made me think—"

"Shut up!" he roared at her. He'd never put the finger of blame on the other guy. It took two to do what they'd done, but it only took one to say "no." Marcia hadn't said it, and he couldn't blame any man for wanting his wife. Especially a weakling like Phil. But now he wanted to shift the blame, knowing that it was wrong to do so. "Just shut up!" he roared again.

But she kept talking in an incomprehensible babble. Not about the black maw that was preparing to devour them, not looking at it, nor even seeming to think about their plight. She recognized death though, and raved on, trying to make things right when they could never be.

"Love me, Ken! For God's sake! Love me!"

He stared at the star-lanced gulf. Something was glistening in its center—a gleaming ball, growing larger, coming toward them out of nowhere. A visitor out of space? A hole torn in the fabric of universe to admit some alien creature?

But the creature in his arms caught his hair and pulled his face down against hers. She kept shrieking his name, and repeating her demand, as if it would save them from the dark death. Grimly he realized that in her mind the black threat was a personal thing whose coming was for the purpose of punishing her. And she clawed at Ken as if he had the power to absolve her guilt, thereby driving the threat away. He pitied her, and held her tightly as the boat swirled on in the rushing torrent whose waves had nearly subsided.

The metallic sphere blossomed larger in the gulf, growing so as to fill the globe of emptiness. The wind seemed to be diminishing as the volume of the sphere occupied more and more of the gap.

"Look, Marsh! It's letting up!"

But she paid no heed. She was laughing now, against his throat, nuzzling his neck, and calling out: "I won't ever try to own you, Ken. Never again. It's the other way around. I'm your property, baby. You hear that? It's what I really wanted, anyway. But I was ashamed. Own me like a piece of furniture, Kennie. That's what I want to be. Do you hear me? And you know what I want you to do with Phil?"

He stared at her and said nothing. It was no time to tell her that she was stuck with life the

way she'd chosen it—if she lived at all. Stuck with Phil, and stuck with ownership. Why ownership, anyway? Still a kid, wanting to be possessed by huge hulking parents, and denying the wish by trying to possess others.

"Know what I want you to do with him? Kill him! *Kill him Kennie!*" Her voice went to a savage snarl. "No, I'll do it! Oh, but they don't let you do that, do they? I'll just maim him, then."

A child shattering a toy. He shuddered and looked at the globe. It had filled the space, and now it was floating in the lake—a hundred foot sphere of metal, half submerged. The wind stopped with a *whoomp!* as it lost its point of exit. There was a moment of calm.

Marcia sat up, gazing at him with worshipful eyes, as if he had been responsible for the disappearance of the threat. Her sodden clothing clung to her shapely young body, and she was shivering slightly as she hugged herself and smiled up at him happily, saying nothing.

He looked around, then gasped. The water, driven by its inertia, was still rolling toward the center of the lake. The boat was being borne ever upward on a rising hillock of water whose center was the floating sphere, now glimmering mysteriously in the light of an early moon. Ken stood up and quickly estimated the final

results of what was happening.

Then he barked at Marcia: "Over the side! There'll be a wave! Hang onto the ring."

For the first time, she seemed to become fully aware of events. She glanced at the sphere and murmured fearfully—but now her fear seemed rational. She glanced back toward the dark shoreline, down the ever-steeping slope of water. Then she tossed him a nervous smile, threw her feet over the side of the boat and slipped into the lake, moaning with pain as the rush of water tore at her ankle. Ken dived out, caught one of the rings on the opposite side of the boat, and called to her: "You okay, Marsh?"

"Okayer than I've ever been, Kennie," she said weakly, but he couldn't see her head beyond the boat.

He kicked his feet and paddled one hand, maneuvering the boat so that its prow was aimed toward the sphere, still being lifted on the watery mountain. He hoped that the backwash, when it came, would not come as a breaker. But already a first crest was rolling down the slope, while the undercurrents still pressed up from beneath.

The crest caught them. The boat swooped up sickeningly, then plunged. The sphere seemed buoyed up higher as the mountain began to sink. Then it sank deeper

much deeper, pressing the water away from it in a roaring, rushing wave.

"K-Kennie—I'm slipping."

"Hang on!" he screamed. "Hang on! It'll be over in a minute!"

"And we'll get married again?"

"Yeah! Hell yeah, we will!" Gasping and fighting the swirling tide, he knew that he meant it. It would be a helluva life, but — "*Hang on!*"

The watery monster was upon them. The boat leaped up, then ducked as the torrent broke over it.

"Kennie—it would have been... better this time—"

Her words choked off suddenly. The boat tipped up on end. Ken gripped the ring and rode it half out of the water. The boat crashed over on its face and the ring tore from his grasp. The icy tide closed over his head for a moment, but the swirling currents buoyed him up again, and he was swimming a few feet from the capsized craft.

"Marcia?" He paused, waiting for her answer. "Marcia!... *Marcia!*... Answer me!... **MARCIA!**"

The moonswept lake was empty—save for the sphere and the overturned boat. The water's surface was concave now; and soon the wave's reflection would sweep back from the shore.

"Marcia!"

Still no answer. Choking with grief, he gasped a lungful of air

and plunged beneath the surface feeling about with his hands, and straining his eyes to penetrate the cold and swirling blackness. The moon made a shimmering mirror of the surface above his head. He dived down deep, as far as his lungs would bear, then turned over on his back and stared upward, hoping to see her form silhouetted against the silver-bright surface. But he could see nothing but the twisting bubble-clouds left by the roaring wave. And the lake was eighty feet deep in places. He dived deeper, giving no heed to the groaning of his lungs for air.

Suddenly he was being pushed by undercurrents. Glancing up, he saw the dim-bright surface growing darker, receding higher above him. The wave was reflecting back and he was being pulled in the thrall of its undertow. The craving for air overwhelmed all thoughts of search. He began fighting his way upward.

The currents were persistent. They bore him up momentarily, then with a rolling motion pressed him downward again, swirling him this way and that. Frantically he clawed at the water. Points of light danced in his mind. A dim disk of self-light bloomed into a great orange sun within his brain. Craving for air overwhelmed reason. He breathed—and almost sighed with relief as the cold tide

sucked into his throat and clogged his nose.

Suddenly he was on the surface, still fighting at the encompassing fluid, still choking for the breath that could not pass the clogged bronchia. Something wound around his arm, like a tight cable or a tentacle. He fought against it weakly as the orange sun grew to consume his mind. Strangling and trying to shriek, he felt himself being tugged upward.

Then, with no sensation of time's passage, he found himself lying face down upon an inclined pallet, with his head hung lower than his feet, coughing the water out of his lungs and throat. He coughed until coughing wore away his consciousness—and he slept.

When he awoke, the pallet had been leveled. He lay upon his back, staring at a low and indirectly lighted ceiling. He glanced around weakly and found himself in a small windowless room, empty save for his pallet and a low pedestal in the center of the floor. The walls and ceiling gleamed dully, as if made of metal. Feebly, he pushed himself to a sitting position. The room was deathly silent.

A hospital?

"Hello!" he called.

There was another moment of silence, then a low and throaty voice issued from a loudspeaker on the wall: "Hello, Thinkman."

He frowned, then caught his breath. The voice, though distorted, seemed familiar. "Marcia?" he called hopefully.

There was another pause, then, "No, we are not the thinkwoman."

Ken felt the back of his neck shiver with crawling flesh. The voice was Marcia's, but the words were not.

"Whoever you are, can't you come in here? Do you have to talk through the wall? What is this anyway?"

Another pause. "Very well, we shall enter. But do not be disturbed by what you see. We remind you again, we are not the thinkwoman."

He heard a click from the loudspeaker, then the muffled sound of a door opening somewhere beyond the wall. It closed again, and a motor whined for several minutes. Suddenly it stopped, the door swung open, and Marcia walked into the room. She stood staring at him calmly, impersonally—with a cool openness he had never seen before. His scalp was crawling again. Something was wrong, bad wrong!

"We remind you for the third time," she said. "We are not the thinkwoman whom you call Marcia. We found it necessary to adopt her image, because she was the only thinkhuman available for detailed biosimulation."

Ken bounded off the cot and re-

treated across the room. His hands were working nervously. Suddenly he felt certain of his whereabouts—he was within the sphere! "What did you do with her?" he cried. "If you're not..."

The image of Marcia answered calmly: "We took her from the lake. Her functions had ceased. We tried to revive her. But certain tissue-degenerations had already occurred. So we used her as a pattern for our own rebiosimulation of this planet's life forms. Except for our internal organs, which are our own invention. Her body is intact. Would you like to see it?"

Ken shook his head dumbly. Conflicting emotions—grief, fear, gnawing anger—flooded him, leaving him helpless to act or speak. He sat down on the pedestal. Had they killed Marcia?

The Marcia-like creature answered his thought: "No, we did not kill her, Thinkman. Observe! We could have deluded you if we wished. We could have impersonated her with complete accuracy and not informed you of her cessation."

He glanced up frowning, prepared to see that it couldn't be done—not with the strange manner of speech. But suddenly the girl-thing smiled. It was Marcia's sophistismile—a pert drawing up at the corners of the mouth. She then hopped upon the edge of the

pallet, crossed her long brown legs, and exposed the pretty knees beneath Marcia's skirt, which had been dried but not re-pressed. She daintily remoulded the back of her hair with her fingertips, then leaned toward him, wrinkling her nose. "Got a cigaret, Ken?" she asked.

He found himself hurrying across the room. "Marcia?..."

"No! We are not the thinkwoman! Watch, please." She gestured toward the wall behind him, and he heard a faint clicking sound.

Nothing happened for a moment. Then a circular patch of wall glowed with dull red heat, faded, and became transparent. He was looking through it into an adjoining room—with a pallet—upon which lay the body of an unhappy child—Marcia, gray in death.

He lowered his head. Maybe it was better. She could never be happy, not with anyone. Well, maybe she died in a happy moment—"okay"er than she'd ever been."

The creature seemed to read his thoughts. "In examining her thinking organ, we found she ceased functioning during a surge of radiant emotion-response."

Ken turned quickly, saw the pert face like a ghost, closed his eyes and shuddered. "As long as you have to look like her. I wish you'd talk like her. What are you anyway?"

She smiled again. "Okay, Ken, if it's more comfortable for you." She paused, summoning a moment of reflection in which to ape Marcia's personality patterns. "I'd better anticipate all your questions, I guess," she murmured thoughtfully. She skipped off the cot, patted his pockets, found a dry and unopened pack of cigarets and lighted one.

"I'm from a star system you never heard of. And I'm a fugitive—the last of my race, so far as I know. We were attacked by a race from our twin planet. They invaded, then began a systematic extermination. They had to; we were so good at mimicry that we could have infiltrated their occupation forces as saboteurs." She paused. "The reason I'm telling you this: I want to live here—on friendly terms."

Ken said nothing. He was still too dazed by her appearance, her mannerisms the tone of her voice...

"I escaped in this ship, found my way to your sun system and hid on your moon for thirty years."

"Moon?"

"Yes. Observing your race—by radio, mostly. Sometimes by opening up a five-space landing tunnel. You know, the 'black cloud' business. Call it a space-warp, if you like. Anyway, I could look through it. Or come through it. I've observed your race care-

fully. And I decided that our basic psychic patterns are similar enough to allow my living here without any real incompatibility—in human form, of course." She hesitated, watching his face. Then, "You're thinking it wouldn't work," she said. "Why?"

Ken paused long enough to wonder why he believed her at all. Surely this was Marcia...some mad gag...some...but no, he believed her. And the shock of recent events kept him from feeling much surprise.

"It wouldn't work," he said dully, "because you're telling me about it, and I presume you mean to tell others."

She nodded. "And so I wouldn't be accepted. Well, I hadn't meant to reveal my identity. But it's become an unpleasant necessity. You see, I'll have to do so in order to convince people that they must evacuate the area around this lake for a hundred and fifty miles. Immediately."

"What! Evacuate! Why?" He leaned forward to glower at her.

With a habit that was irritatingly Marcia's, she held her cigaret's glow close to her lips, and blew off the ashes with a thin jet of smoke between her pretty lips. "That's right," she said calmly. "The enemy's in the solar system now—looking for me. If they find

this, find this five-space sphere..." She snapped her fingers ominously. The surrounding geography will probably collect in an orbit around the earth. You'll have a new ocean." She shrugged. "I'm sorry about it, but I never thought they'd trail me here."

Ken frowned angrily. A hundred and fifty mile radius! That would encompass several large industrial cities. Why hadn't she gone to another planet? Or at least to empty desert country. Actually, she was responsible for...

"For Marcia's death," she finished his thought aloud. "That's right. I'll repay according to the code of my race. But first, look at this other business. I already had this five-space course plotted ...from that moon crater to here. I plotted it before I saw the enemy ship come into Sol's field—out by Pluto. After that, there was no time to plot another; it's an intricate business. And I couldn't blast off by rocket; they'd pick up my jets on gamma scanners. I had to wink in right here; or else sit on the moon and wait for them to blast me."

"Which wouldn't have been a bad idea," he said angrily.

She reddened slightly. "Unfortunately, in taking on another creature's form and personality pattern, I'm forced to duplicate that creature's emotions. And, in this form, I'm afraid I agree with you." She lowered her eyes

unhappily and stubbed out the cigaret.

Ken softened his voice slightly feeling as if he were speaking to Marcia's twin. "Well, what're you going to do about it?"

She put her elbows on her knees, her chin on her palms, stared at him, and shook her head thoughtfully. "I don't know, Ken. I've submerged the sphere, and we're below the lake. But they'll find it anyway. And blast it. They're more interested in the sphere than they are in me. Because if they destroy it I'm stuck here. And that's all they want—to make certain I don't go back to my system and infiltrate them."

"Why don't you just leave again?" he muttered.

"I told you. No time to plot a five-space course. They'll be here in a few days—and they'd catch me in a gamma scanner if I used rocket blast off."

"Blast off anyway!" he said stubbornly.

She caught her breath, then frowned. "Suicide? To keep them from blasting this area? No—bluntly, no. Examining your thinkwoman's neural patterns, I don't think she'd have done it either."

"She was atypical," he growled. "Neurotic."

The alien-Marcia nodded. "I agree. Incidentally, she'd have

been miserable if she'd lived. Are you interested in knowing why?"

"Some other time," he grunted.

"I'll tell you anyway," she said, winning a frown from Ken, who saw another habit of his ex-wife therein. "She stayed in emotional babyhood. She wanted passivity, to be dominated by parent-images. Subconsciously she knew it, and consciously told herself it wasn't so. And she tried to prove it wasn't so—by sophistication, by pseudo-aggression, by dominating others. Then you broke her defense."

"How?" he grunted.

Marcia's ghost watched him peculiarly. "You left her in the face of her threats, you let her divorce you, you invited her here with her husband—which shocked her thoroughly and ruined her pride. You refused her, and you refused to be dominated. You dominated her, you frightened her—although I helped some there—and she still loved you. So—she gave up her defense, and admitted to herself that she wanted to play the submissive child, not the dominating parent."

"But why do you say she'd have been miserable?"

"Because from now on she'd identify you with her parent. She'd expect to be bullied, ordered around, dominated—as proof of the identity. And when you didn't do it, she'd do something to make you do it—fits of temper,

tantrums, unfaithfulness, and—"

"How do you know all this?" he snapped.

She shrugged. "Why shouldn't I? I absorbed the neural patterns, her memory. I remember her experiences as if they happened to me. But I have the advantage of being able to look at them objectively."

Ken shifted uneasily, feeling the heat in his face. "All of her memories?"

She smiled tightly. "All of her memories, Kenne. Would you like me to tell you all about Phil?"

He shuddered and dragged his face through his hands. "No thanks. Suppose we just talk about what you intend to do about this mess."

"Give me another cigaret, then."

Ken pitched her the pack. "I shouldn't have picked up her habits too," she said as she lit one. Then she eyed him brazenly. "Since you suggest suicidal bravery, suppose I teach you the rocket controls and let you blast the sphere off while I stay here on earth."

Ken spent the next thirty seconds staring at her and cursing softly. She rewarded him only with a quizzical smirk.

"It was your idea," she went on. "After all, it's your race, not mine. I'm sorry and all that, but I've got no intention of sacrificing my-



self for them. Why don't you do it?"

He cursed her again, feeling the blind rage of impotence. But seeing his thoughts, she was able to hit at his sorest spots.

"Sign of your immaturity," she murmured. "Just like Marcia's. You identify me with a parent and expect me to make sacrifices that you won't make." Then she added quickly. "Uh-uh! Pseudo-aggression!"

Helplessly, he checked the urge to kick her teeth out. He sat down again and put his face in his hands, remaining silent for a long time. "What will you do if I agree?" he asked dejectedly.

She shrugged, and a note of sadness crept into her voice. "First I'd have to fulfill the code—in regard to Marcia's death. I'd impersonate her, take her place."

"As Phil's wife?"

She nodded. "It would be rather distasteful, but maybe I could straighten up the mess." She looked up suddenly with an angry frown. "You're thinking I've got an obligation to you! You're crazy!"

He smirked. "She was coming back to me, wasn't she? You've already admitted it!"

She gave him as nasty a grin as he'd ever seen on Marcia's face during one of her nastier moments. "Yes, Kenny boy! She was. Would you like me to take

her place for you? After what you know about me?"

Ken, who was conceiving a plan, nodded. "Yes, I would," he said firmly. "And in the precise way you predicted she'd behave in the future. Is that part of your code? For all I know about it, you could lie about it and shrug it off. Do you live by your code or just excuse yourself with it? The way we do with ours," he added hastily.

She whitened, seeing the nature of his plan. For a moment her eyes flared angrily. Then she stood up proudly. "My race was an honorable people. And we are so ancient that our ethical code has become a part of our biological nature. It's too bad you can't say the same. I'll honor my obligations. Do you insist that I fulfill her intention to return to you?"

He nodded solemnly, returning her stabbing glances, and knowing that she saw his slightly treacherous plan. If she, on the other hand, were lying about her race's moral stature, then the plan was worthless. Funny moral code, he thought, that would let her sit by while her enemy destroyed a million innocent people, but insisted that she pay for the life of one girl whose death had been more or less accidental.

"I find your ethics equally silly," she snorted. "But now, my husband—if that's what you will—I'm going to show you my

natural form! Watch, Kennie, watch! And see if you still want me to fulfill...*watch!*"

He turned his back quickly and covered his eyes. Cold fingers were dancing along his spine. Had he seen her skin change slightly? He refused to watch, lest the sight destroy his resolve. He gritted his eyes tightly together and tried to close his mind.

But her voice became a croak, "Watch watch watch," became an adder's hiss. "*Watch watch watch!*" A wet voice, oozing up out of soft mush. He moaned and closed his ears, but the voice was breathing against the back of his trouserlegs, from about the height of his knees. Then he felt the tendril touching his ankle—like the one that had tugged him from the lake—and he cried out in horror as he kicked at it and stumbled away.

"Is this the way you fulfill the obligation?" he shrieked. The tendril was entangled in his feet. He stumbled and fell headlong, still covering his face with his hands.

There was a long silence. Then he heard her footsteps again. A door opened. He glanced around to see the space witch rummaging through a small cabinet in the wall. She found a small phial with a needle attached, drove the needle into her arm, and squeezed the plastic sides of the bottle.

Then she closed the cabinet, rested her forehead against it and leaned there breathing heavily, as if awaiting the effect of the drug.

"Exactly." They locked calm glances for a moment.

"Well...are you going to show me the controls?"

She moved to the pallet and sat down again, in passive refusal or delay. He didn't remind her of her self-imposed obligation; yet he tried to trust in it. Trust a being such as this? She saw his thoughts and straightened slightly.

"My race was almost human once."

He shrugged, but said nothing. It seemed hard to believe.

"Any race that stays in space a billion years will develop powers of biosimulation as a way of adapting to different planets, varying gravities, climates, and so forth."

"Let's go to the controls. Get the ship out of here before dawn."

She eyed him nervously. "You know the consequences? They'll see us on the gamma scanners. Then they'll connect a five-space channel between us and the sun." She gestured around at the walls of the room. "You'll live long enough to see them go white hot, then melt."

"Let's go."

She hesitated briefly, then set her face in hard lines. "No! I've changed my mind. I'm staying."

He started toward her in anger; then she was holding him off with a small, innocent-looking weapon the size of a fountain pen.

"Ethics, he grunted, staring at it.

She kept it levelled at his chest, saying nothing, eyeing him coldly. He turned away and walked to the door, expecting death from behind. But she let him open it. A tiny cubicle lay beyond. Grill work in the ceiling told him that it was an airlock. He started into it.

"Better not," she said coolly. "The atmosphere in the rest of the ship is that of my home planet. You wouldn't like it, to say the least."

"Could it be changed?"

"Of course. But I don't intend doing it. And you don't know how." She smirked brightly. "I suggest you go on alone and leave me here, on earth."

Irritably, he slammed the door, glared at her. "I don't know which is worse—letting half of New England be blasted off the map, or wishing you on the world. But since it's my only choice..."

She laughed Marcia's laugh. "I assure you I'll behave myself."

"Like you've been doing?" he sneered.

"Not at all. Have you ever been alone?—for forty years?—completely alone? It's not pleasant. I'm gregarious—with any race. I can settle down and adapt to your social forms with no trouble

at all. I'll even starve myself of the food-components that make biosimulation possible—a certain vitamin you might call it; my race needs it—but I'll forego it so I can't change. My race is gone, Ken; I've got no home. I'm going to adopt yours. Have children, and—"

"Children!" he roared in horror.

"Why not? They'd be human, if I wanted them to be."

He shuddered, then said grimly, "Okay, let's get it over with."

She hopped off the pallet and moved to the door. "I'll get you a pressure suit so you can endure the air outside."

Then she was gone through the lock and he paced the floor restlessly. Pressure suit to fit a human? How could she have such a thing?

He stopped before the wall cabinet and stared at it. The hypo-food-components that make biosimulation possible. He opened it and glanced at the several dozen phials—all identical. Then he began removing their caps and pouring the sticky yellow contents on the floor, expecting her to burst back into the room at any moment. But evidently the telepathic power was limited to the immediate vicinity; he emptied the last bottle and closed the cabinet again.

He glanced at his watch. There

was moisture in the case, but it hadn't stopped yet. Still four hours until dawn. It would be better to get the sphere away before the sun rose—for surely someone would come to investigate the freak storm.

She was a strange creature, he thought—the space witch. A personality half-alien, half-Marcia's. He was certain that her change of attitude, her decision to thwart her code, was due to Marcia's emotional patterns, not her own—if she had any that she could call her own.

Suddenly he heard her enter the lock again. Evidently she was undergoing the biosimulation process, to readapt to the change of atmospheres. The door opened, and she entered, carrying a spray gun, a hose, and a pressure cylinder. She stepped in the puddle of fluid, then glanced down at her feet.

Her face went chalk white. She moaned, and dropped the paraphernalia. Ken took advantage of her shock to slap the weapon from her hand. It belched a streak of blue fire that lanced past him and reddened the metal wall. He picked it up and backed away from her.

But she fell to her knees and began trying to suck some of the liquid up in one of the phials. She was mumbling in fright.

"Get back!" he growled, but she seemed not to hear him. He

caught her shoulder roughly, and sent her spinning across the floor. then he touched the weapon's firing stud, and played the blue lance over the puddle of liquid. It vaporized in a cloudy rush of steam.

"Now, where's the pressure suit?" he demanded of the wailing space witch.

"You've destroyed me!" she shrieked. "I need that compound! Don't you understand? It's a vital food-substance for me!"

"Then you lied," he snapped. "You said you weren't going to use it."

"You fool!" she shrilled. "now I can't even readapt to my own atmosphere! If I do, I'll deplete my system of the compound, and I can't get back to this form!"

"Good! Where's the pressure suit?"

She backed into a corner, sat hugging her shins and glaring at him. She set her jaw stubbornly and said nothing.

He glanced at the paraphernalia she brought with her. "You better play it my way, sister!" he snapped. "There's nothing else you can do. What's this stuff for?"

She sat there trembling for a time, hating him with her eyes. Then she climbed weakly to her feet. "Never mind 'that stuff'. It was to spray a membrane suit around you. But you won't need it. I'll have to change the atmosphere in order to get out of

here myself." She crossed the room and entered the pressure lock. "Hold the door open for me," she said dully, "so the pumps won't start."

He jammed the door with his foot, and watched her jab several buttons on a control panel. The sphere began to vibrate, as giant pumps began working at the conditions beyond the air-lock. "It'll be a few minutes," she muttered.

Ken waited nervously. Perhaps she was tricking him. Surely she wouldn't give up so easily. She gave him a nervous glance that seemed to confirm his suspicion. "Stay out of my thoughts," he growled at her, but she sniffed.

The pumps stopped. He held his breath as she swung open the door, expecting a choking gust of chlorine or methane, but the air was clear and clean. She led him out into a large central control room, whose walls were a solid array of instrument panels. She moved to the nearest section.

"Here's the five-space drive. You can see for yourself why there's no time to use it. All these settings have to be worked out first."

He stared over her shoulder and counted thirty-two calibrated dials and several sliding verniers. A heavy switch with a safety lock dominated the center of the panel. He touched it thoughtfully.

"No!" she snapped. "That cuts on the drive!"

"How long would it take to work out these settings?"

"Over a week. Too long."

"How about random settings?"

"No! Come on, I'll show you the rocket controls."

He followed her reluctantly, glancing back at the five-space drive. She stopped at another panel and began flicking on switches.

"What're you doing?" he growled.

She said nothing for a time. Then he smelled faint smoke. She turned to grin at him triumphantly, and answered his question: "Burning out control wires, that's all. By the time they're fixed, it'll be too late. Well, Ken, shall we go to your cottage? Or would you rather just sit here? We should be getting the government to evacuate this area."

He backed away, cursing softly. He went back to the five-space panel and began twisting dials at random.

"No. You fool!" she screamed.

"You'll dump us out of the universe. You'll have us out a billion light years from nowhere."

"So what?" he grunted.

She started toward him, but he played the flame-lance across the floor just ahead of her. She stopped.

"No, Ken! Our food's limited—fuel, air, everything."

"How limited?" He was still playing with the dials.

"Only about fifty years . . ."

He laughed mockingly. "You shouldn't have said that. That's just about my lifespan."

He jerked the switch. Then his knees sagged as a surge of force came up from beneath. His legs buckled beneath him, and the ship shook with an inner thunder. He sprawled to the floor and caught a glimpse of the space witch lying in a crumpled heap. As a great weight pressed upon him and he felt consciousness slipping away, he wondered what she'd look like if she slept. The hissing voice, the tendrils?

Ken sat up and realized he'd been unconscious for a time. The girl was still sprawled on the floor. He climbed to his feet and went to shake her lightly. After a moment she opened her eyes, staring around blankly.

For an instant she was Marcia. Then she caught herself and hissed rage at him: "Fool! Do you realize what you've done?"

He shrugged indifferently. She bounded to her feet and darted to a large screen. She twisted a set of controls, but the screen remained dark. "We're still driving through five-space!" She turned to face him, green eyes flashing angrily.

"The chances are a million to one that we'll dump in some intergalactic waste. We can't ever get back! And we probably can't even get to another galaxy. The drive

requires the presence of a strong gravitic field to start with."

He grinned sourly and looked around the control room. "I take it we're not on earth any more?"

"That's right! You've accomplished your purpose."

He sat down with a tired sigh. "Okay, baby. It's what I wanted. Now do your worst. Change into a jellyfish or something."

She glared at him briefly, then turned her back and marched toward a distant doorway.

"What're you going to do?" he snapped, fumbling for the weapon again.

"The only thing I can do!" she called back.

He shrugged and let her go. Her footsteps faded away in the corridor and he was alone. Alone for the next fifty years, he thought, in the emptiness of space, hopelessly lost. The sphere would have to be a world, a world haunted by a witch. Well, it was better than letting a million people die.

A faint shriek came to his ears. His scalp bristled, and he started toward the corridor, then stopped. The shriek had died, and there was silence. He sat down again. Might as well let her do whatever she wanted to, he thought.

Then he heard her coming back, stumbling along the corridor. He peered at her quickly, half expecting to see her in a nonhuman

form. But she was still the dark-haired and slender girl—staggering toward him, white-faced, clutching the wall for support. Then she saw him, pushed herself from the wall, and darted toward him. In a moment she was shivering against his chest.

"Kennie! Kennie! How did we get here? O God! I must be losing my mind! I don't remember...how did we get here? Where are we?"

Ken swallowed hard. Had the witch destroyed her own personality, her own consciousness? Maybe...

"I...I dragged you in here out of the lake," he told her nervously.

"Lake? Kennie! What lake? We were sitting on the living-room floor...by...the fireplace...weren't we?" She pushed herself away and stared up at him in horror.

He felt on the verge of losing his grip. On the floor, by the fireplace! That could only be the day three years ago when he told her he was going to Europe.

"Kennie! Tell me what happened!" She was shaking him hard. "Did I faint or something? Did I? Tell me!"

"Tell you later, babe," he muttered. Then he glanced at her doubtfully, and guarded his voice. "Wonder where Phil is?"

No comprehension came into her eyes. She shook her head. "Phil? Phil who? What're you talking about?"

He took her face in his hands and stared into her eyes for a long time, then said: "Hi, babe."

She grinned weakly, made an unvoiced "hi" with her lips, then hung her head sheepishly. "Kennie..."

"Yeah?"

"I guess I was being a little stubborn about ...Europe. If it means that much to you, then go ahead. I'll wait. I didn't mean those awful things I said—honest."

"We'll talk about it later," he muttered nervously. Evidently, he thought, the space witch had done away with some of the flaws in Marcia's character. Suddenly he patted her hand. "You stay right here. I'll be back in a few minutes."

She nodded, and he hurried away. Somewhere in the sphere was Marcia's body. He had to get rid of it before Marcia found it. And he was smiling faintly as he began his search. Life wouldn't be so bad now, maybe. The new world was limited in size, but he'd done enough traveling in his day. And with Marcia in it, the world would be large enough.

The space witch watched him disappear through the doorway. Then she smiled sardonically. It had been easy—convincing him. She chuckled to herself. Maybe she should allow herself to resume her normal shape while in his arms.

But the thought sobered her. If she did a thing like that, she'd probably be unable to resume Marcia's form—because he'd destroyed the compound. And in a few weeks she wouldn't be able to do it. Her bodily supply of the substance would be diminished. "And it would be a dirty trick anyway," said the part of her that was Marcia.

The witch weighed her present position. She had spent forty years of isolation on the moon. It

had been a terrible loneliness. Now she at least had company. And with Marcia's memory, she remembered that he could be a very affectionate fellow—when treated properly.

"I'll treat him properly," she murmured to herself, and pulled up her skirt to examine the still-unfamiliar human walking devices. She flexed the knee and wiggled the foot. "Not bad, not bad at all."

The End

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# MR. DIMMITT SEEKS REDRESS

## MILES J. BREUER, M.D.

"IT'S no use, Professor," the lawyer said sympathetically to the hopeless looking little man in spectacles. "You have no witnesses. It is only your word against his. Old Graw is rich and unscrupulous, and a wily old politician."

The little man stared helplessly across the desk at the trim and ample figure of the successful attorney.

"Nothing?" he asked feebly. "He murdered my wife and daughter!"

"I advise against legal action," the lawyer repeated gently but firmly, doing his best to soften the hopeless finality of the statement. "There is nothing to bring before a court. You would not stand a chance in the world. And you have no money to waste."

"No," Dimmitt murmured. "I haven't even enough to get me another car."

He sat silent for a while. Then he rose. Standing up he was only slightly taller than the seated lawyer. The thousand little wrinkles on his face settled into an expression of dull despair.

"What do I owe you?" he asked reluctantly.

"I shouldn't think of charging you a fee under the circumstances," the lawyer replied kindly.

As the bowed little man walked out, the lawyer felt a surge of pity. In front of him on his desk was the pad of notes he had taken of the Professor's story; and in his mind it remained still more vivid. There was the hard-working scientist driving his little Ford on a mountain road near the city,

taking his wife and daughter out for an airing. This humble pleasure was about all that his absorbed and retiring life permitted. Then came Graw, the big bully, tearing around the corner at terrific speed in a huge car, blaring his raucous horn.

"Out of the way!" he roared holding his leering red face out of his window, as he perceived the Professor's little car in his way.

The lawyer could readily imagine that the timid little man was startled and disconcerted, and in his panic to get out of the way, got a wheel over the edge of the road; he could also imagine the brutal impatience of the big coarse man, stepping with a snarl on his pedal and sending his huge car plunging by. It took a mere touch of the big car's fender to send the Ford crashing down the steep slope of the mountain. The big car roared on along the road, and the red-faced man never even looked back. Some hours later tourists found the professor sitting on the wreckage, repeating over and over the license-number of the car that had hit him. The dead bodies of his wife and daughter lay crushed under the wreckage. But no one saw the accident. There was no evidence except Dimmitt's recollection of the car number and his identification of Graw, the rich politician, as the roadhog.

"Funny chap," thought the big lawyer, watching the bowed and timid figure of the Professor retreating through the door. "Didn't rave and swear vengeance. Seemed to be studying intently over the thing, and murmured something about having to 'devise some sort of redress.' Queer way to put it."

Out of the window he could see Professor Dimmitt walking slowly and thoughtfully past, along the sidewalk, his head bent down as though in thought. At the corner, a huge, red-faced man stepped out in front of him, as though he had been waiting there. His fat lips were rolled repulsively around a black cigar. He looked every inch a bully. Also, he looked like one of those people who are in danger of a stroke of apoplexy from a sudden fit of temper. He blocked Professor Dimmitt's way, and the latter had to stop.

"If you don't know me, I'm Graw," he said huskily with a coarse, slangy accent. Professor Dimmitt started, but said nothing.

"I want to tell yuh somethin' fer yer own good," the florid-faced boss continued. "Yuh bin to a lawyer, hey? Well, take my advice and fergit it. Yuh can't touch me. But if yuh bother me too much, I'll smash yuh, just like I've smashed bigger guys 'n you. Now beat it!"

He gave the little man a shove

which sent him stumbling for several steps.

Professor Dimmitt thanked his lifelong scientific training. It enabled him to recognize with impersonal detachment that anger on his part would do no good at this point. He recovered his balance and did not even look back at Graw.

"It's a problem, all right," he said to himself. "Just as hard as the re-crystallization of radium-fluorescin. But, quite as amenable to solution on proper study."

He walked on, talking to himself.

"The man needs a lesson," he said to himself. "The big brute thinks he can commit murder and let it go at that."

"Well," he sighed wearily, "I'll have to take sometime away from electromagnetic frequencies to get at this problem."

"Why, how do you do, Professor Dimmitt?" a cordial voice hailed him.

"Good morning, Mrs. Mathers," Professor Dimmitt said tonelessly even though the large and cheerful lady in the blue suit was the wife of a fellow professor.

Mrs. Mathers pitied him. He looked so forlorn that even a tear glistened in his brown eye. She and Mrs. Dimmitt had been intimate friends before the latter's tragical death.

"Can't you come and eat dinner with us tonight?" she said. Just

informally with the family—"

"It is very kind of you," Professor Dimmitt said gently and firmly. "I understand your motive and am grateful to you. But I have things on my mind—"

"I know, I want you to forget," protested Mrs. Mathers.

"I'm not grieving. That is futile. I have work and plans. That is what I have to live for now."

Mrs. Mathers shook her head as she looked after the departing man. That might be the best balm for his sorrow, she thought. Some of the world's best work has been accomplished by lonely, unhappy men. She was the wife of a scientist.

Professor Dimmitt was working on the preparation and purification of a chemical compound in which the sodium of sodium-fluorescin was replaced by radium. It ought to have some remarkable optical and physiological properties, he thought.

"We're near the end of our problem," he said to his laboratory assistant one evening a few days later. "It is rather thrilling, after these tedious weeks of detail work. You may go home now. I'll wait and watch this crystallize."

"I'll be glad to stay and help you, sir," the student said.

"There's nothing to do, thank you. Merely to watch the filtration. You can see the stuff to-

morrow. Besides I want to think."

"Ah!" the young man exclaimed. He knew his chief. "You have a new problem on, sir?"

"Oh, of a sort," the Professor sighed. "There ought to be some automatic, direct way of punishing careless automobile drivers. The law is a joke. I ought to be able to figure out some sort of a device."

The assistant left, and Professor Dimmitt watched the drops come on one by one from the end of the funnel. In the bottom of the beaker below it, beautiful iridescent greenish crystals were forming. Splash, splash, splash, went the yellow drops into the beaker. Through the open window came the rattle of busy traffic from the street below, raised at this moment to its maximum pitch because the hordes were madly racing homeward from offices and shops.

It happened suddenly, unexpectedly.

A puff of wind blew away the circular sheet of filter paper with which the glass funnel was covered. Professor Dimmitt snatched at it quickly, but it eluded him. He leaned over the table a little too far, and his spectacles came off. They fell with a splash into the fluorescent green beaker. Several drops struck his face. In a moment his eyes were stinging painfully.

His heart gave a wild leap of fear. Both of his eyes had been

directly struck by drops of the fluid. Its effect was totally unknown. It was a new substance, that the world had never seen before. Through his mind there flashed a vision of himself groping blindly through life for the rest of his years.

But the stinging cleared away promptly, and he found that he could see clearly. Nothing was wrong.

He felt immensely relieved. But something *was* wrong. Just what it was, he could not at once recognize. He was under the impression that he had drawn his hand back some minutes ago, from where it had been outstretched, reaching for the flying filter paper. But there it was still, stretched out across the table. A little ahead of it was the piece of filter paper hanging motionless in the air, nothing supporting it. There it hung, steady, suspended, immobile. Before it had been sailing rapidly floorward. Something was indeed wrong.

Next he found himself gazing fascinatedly at a drop of the yellow fluid, in the air, an inch below the lower end of the funnel. The little globule of yellow liquid hung there, like a planet in the skies, still and motionless in mid-air. It glistened as he stared at it but did not move. Then, as he peered intently at it for a long time, he noted that slowly, very slowly, it moved downward a lit-

tle and drew further away from the lower tip of the funnel. Also, after many minutes, he could see a change in the position of his hand which had been poised in pursuit of the filter paper. It was closer to him. Intent scrutiny showed that indeed it was moving, but slowly. Just about the speed of the minute hand of a clock, it had. He could not see it move. Only after he had watched it awhile, he could recognize that it had changed position slightly.

In front of him across the table was the open window. He looked out. But he still saw the beaker and the funnel. That was eerie. He had moved his eyes upwards to look out of the window, but still saw the table-top with its glassware and his outstretched hand. It was many minutes of intense effort before his field of vision moved slowly across the table to the window and outside. Then, for a considerable while, everything was blurred and out-of-focus. Finally his astonished gaze rested on the street.

The whole scene in front of him, a busy downtown intersection, was paralyzed! Petrified! It looked like a street in excavated Pompeii, with everybody turned to stone. Crowded people were motionless, in the most grotesque of attitudes. Cars stood still. A messenger boy was rigidly balanced upright on a bicycle defying all laws of equil-

librium. People seemed frozen in the most unnatural attitudes, walking with one foot forward at a queer angle, or balanced forever on one toe. Yet, traffic noises came to his ears, the roar and bustle of going-home time downtown.

He stood there and stared at the rigidly motionless street-scene out of the window, amazed. There were so many queer things to look at, policemen with poised arms, ladies balanced on the edge of a street-car step, newsboys with mouth wide open permanently, that he spent a long time looking from one to the other out of sheer curiosity. After what seemed ten or fifteen minutes, he noted that the messenger-boy's pedals were vertical instead of horizontal, and the front rim of his bicycle wheel was some inches farther behind the mailbox.

Professor Dimmitt's mind was such that he needed a solution for the phenomenon as promptly as possible. It was plain enough after a moment's thought. All external movement was slowed down. But the change was apparent to vision only. The radium-fluorescein had splashed into his eyes. He had expected this new chemical on theoretical grounds to be a metabolic accelerator. It had simply increased the perception-rate of his retina to about a hundred times more rapid ac-

tion than normal. As a result, normal motion appeared a hundred times slower to his eye.

Now, what would the substance do if applied to all of the body cells, instead of to a small portion like the eye?

That question occupied him for some time with its thrilling possibilities so that he forgot to watch the grotesquely frozen street scene. He stood there waiting, wondering how long it would take for the substance to be eliminated from his retinal cells, and for the slowing-down effect to wear off.

This was a real discovery. There was money in it. It ought to yield profit, real wealth. And money, which had never appealed to him before, now meant an opportunity to crush Graw. Without money he was helpless. With money, and lots of it, he could get at Graw. He could expose the bully's brutality to the public; he could hire crooked lawyers and fight crookedness with crookedness. He could break Graw. Or, he could fight brutality with brutality. Money would readily hire sluggers to give him the beating of his life. The thought of it was a pleasure.

It seemed to him that he stood there for hours. He had time to think out and prepare details for preparing sterile solutions of his new salt for intravenous injection, and a series of

experiments on animals to determine its toxicity. He started to make some notes, but found that his hand moved so slowly that he could not see the movement; it was like the movement of mercury rising in a thermometer. He gave up the attempt to write, and went over his reasoning several times to fix it in his memory. Then he looked out at the immobilized street again, with the intermediate blurring due to the fact that the retina could see more quickly than the ciliary muscle could adjust the focus of his eye from near to far. The messenger boy was now a foot further behind the mailbox. A man in light gray whose feet had been far apart now had them together. But everything was motionless, frozen.

He began to be worried. He had read of persons who had tried a dose of *cannabis indica* having terrifying experiences from the effects of the drug. Was the effect of this thing going to be permanent? Would he have to drag through all his life this way, with this discrepancy between vision and action? Could a man in such a condition accomplish any work? He spent a good deal of time in uncomfortable misgivings, hours of it, it seemed.

But he began to see signs of beginning movement in the street. The wheels of a long, low car

were slowly creeping round in a circle; the spokes actually moved. It was a weird effect as he stared long and patiently and watched it slowly accelerate; wheels beginning to turn, people's legs beginning to swing. Cars and people began moving, past each other, and faster. Long after the scene had resumed its normal swift flurry, he stood there and wondered. Then he looked at the clock. It was 5:35. His assistant had left at 5:30.

But, he had something now! He knew that. Just a little more investigation, and he would put it on the market. Money would begin to come in. The thing had commercial possibilities as a means of observation for testing rapidly moving machinery, judging and coaching athletics, studying efficiency in industrial movements—many possibilities. But it was pleasanter to turn his thoughts to wealth and powerful lawyers; to the power that money gives one over one's enemies.

So the animal experiments were quickly and satisfactorily accomplished and the dosage for human administration easily determined. One evening, just after his assistant left, he injected the proper sixty milligrams into a vein in his arm.

If he expected any transition sensation, he was disappointed. He felt nothing. There was no

change in himself. None in the laboratory. He moved his hands and watched. The movements were natural. He walked about. That all went naturally. He looked out of the window. The street was again frozen. Rigid. Motionless. With the exception of the petrified street, everything else seemed natural.

But no; the traffic noise was absent. He listened. He heard a slow, rhythmic tapping interspersed with low, hoarse tones. It was sound, perceived by his ears a hundred times more rapidly than normal. Sound vibrations came to his brain as though slowed down a hundred times.

He put on his hat and coat and walked out into the motionless street. He found himself walking around the rigid people as though among a vast grouping of statues. Rather they seemed like wax figures, lifelike but motionless. They were in the utmost variety of grotesque attitudes, like the unnatural high-speed snapshot photographs of horses jumping over gates or men diving. Expressions on peoples' faces looked all right at first glance. But they were fixed. They stayed that way. Like highly emotional stone statues. Professor Dimmitt stood within a foot of a man who gazed straight ahead, but showed not the least sign of being conscious that anyone was in front of him. He moved his hands about in front

of the man's eyes. There was no change; there was the same rigid, queerly poised statue.

The motionless cars were queer. The drivers were strained, intent; their eyes popping out, their hands gripping steering-wheels—immobile. He leaned into a car and looked at the speedometer, and repeated it several times. Twenty, thirty miles, they showed, as he stood on the ground rested a hand on the door, and leaned his head in. The occupants retained their frozen expressions and showed no consciousness of his presence.

He walked about, like an explorer in an ancient city which had been frozen or petrified ages ago. He seemed to be the only man alive. He went into shops, where there were goods on counters. As he walked past trays of jewelry, he realized the possibilities for crime that lay in his invention. As he thought of his own eagerness for wealth he shuddered, and hurried out. He was excited.

He walked to cool down his excitement. He left the downtown district behind, and walked first among apartments and then among residences. Everywhere, people and automobiles were motionless, and there was silence except for the tapping. Children were posed in rigid attitudes, with no change in position during the period that it took him to pass

out of their sight. The sight of them affected him deeply. Children ought not to be caught up in this business. A pang gripped his heart as he thought of his little daughter crushed under the wreckage of his car.

Then he was startled to find himself walking down the street on which Graw lived. There was Graw's house a half block away. There was Graw's fat, insolent, five-year old son out on the lawn. The unconscious mind plays odd pranks with the body in which it lives. Unconsciously, Dimmitt had realized that his accelerated state gave him a vast power over other people. It was a simple step in his unconscious reasoning to Graw, the man over whom he most desired power. Unconsciously his footsteps had turned that way.

In the street were several motionless cars. One was in the act of turning into its garage. It was the coming-home hour men were arriving from downtown and dinners were being made ready. And there, on the boulevard was Graw's long green Pierce-Arrow car. In it sat Graw hunched over the wheel, head forward, hands tight on the steering-wheel. It was a perfect picture of frozen speed.

"At it again!" thought Dimmitt. "Laws mean nothing to him." He walked over to look at Graw's speedometer.



Dimmitt's heart hardened as he saw that the instrument registered fifty-five miles per hour. That was an unreasonable rate on a city street, with children running about. It was not only reckless; it was criminally dangerous. Graw was wont to defy everybody and everything. Dimmitt's timid nature suddenly rose up in anger and determination such as it had never known before.

He acted quickly. He walked over to Graw's front yard and picked up the man's young son. He carried the boy out in the street and set him on the pavement, twenty feet ahead of Graw's big, green car. He figured that this distance was sufficient to permit Graw to see the boy clearly, but not sufficient to enable Graw to check the speed he was making, and prevent the car from running over the boy. If he were not breaking the law, Dimmitt said to himself viciously, he would be able to stop perfectly well within that distance.

Then he stood behind the boy and waited. He took care to stand perfectly motionless, because he wanted Graw to see him. The reason that people could not see Dimmitt in his accelerated state, was that he moved too fast. He was just like the spokes in a flying wheel; he moved so swiftly that they could see right through him.

He waited many minutes. He

could not see the car move toward him, but after a long wait, he could see that it was a foot ahead of its original position. A change had begun to creep into the expression of the red-faced man at the wheel. The eyes began to widen. Dimmitt had plenty of time to think. Graw would see him there behind the boy; and he would at first think that Dimmitt was sacrificing his own life to get revenge. But that kind of revenge was not sweet enough for Dimmitt. He would have to let Graw see him afterwards. Such a meeting had dangers, but the details could be planned later. He switched his mind from planning them. It was much more gleeful to contemplate Graw's discomfiture at not being able to produce witnesses, at having no legal redress. No one would believe such a wild tale; that the Professor had dragged his boy in front of the wheels of his car and then escaped himself and disappeared. They would think Graw was crazy. Dimmitt would bow politely to him at that point. Also, he ought to ask for police protection, but that was also a detail to be settled later. The present occasion was too satisfactory to miss.

After many minutes (long periods of waiting, anyway) he found that the car was another foot ahead, and that a stare of horror was gradually taking shape

in the bloated red face. The big, fat body seemed to lean back more, as though in the act of raising a foot to a brake pedal.

Dimmitt gloated. Graw had seen the child already! Dimmitt looked down at the child, who was still in the same position; and then up at his father's cruel face, the terrified expression on which now delighted Dimmitt's heart. After all, there was something of the primitive human animal, even in the highly cultured little professor. This was atonement for the loss of his wife, child, and car. More and more the foot was poised toward the brake, though no actual movement was visible. It was interesting to figure proportionate distances: the distance which the foot and the brake had to move, the distance the car had to go, the time which it would stop, the time in which it would go the remaining seventeen feet.

Dimmitt could also see that the steering wheel was deflected to one side, but not yet enough even to take up the loose play; it would be ages before the steering mechanism engaged the front wheels, which were still headed straight to the front, toward the child. The color of Graw's face was less red than before. Pallor was beginning to appear.

Dimmitt shook his fist at the big man and shouted;

"Ha! ha! Big brute! How do you like it? You can see me,

can't you? The helpless little Dimmitt, whom you crushed?"

Dimmitt was forgetting that he was a scientist, in the savage glee of his revenge. It did not occur to him at the moment that his voice was pitched in vibrations one hundred times higher than the normal human voice, which would make his gibe such a high squeak that ears as human as Graw's could never hear it.

By this time the expression of horror was thoroughly established in the big man's face. His complexion was so pale that he looked like someone else. Desperately his foot was reaching toward the brake pedal and his hands tugged sideways at the wheel.

Dimmitt was losing his professorial dignity. He was astonished to find himself jumping up and down in front of the car, and gibbering like a savage doing a war-dance. His joy at the triumph over his enemy overpowered him. He went into a frenzy of excitement; he yelled and executed a wild, furious dance.

For hours, it seemed that he danced, and all of the time, the car crept closer and closer to the child. As Dimmitt danced and yelled taunts at Graw, he noted that the child was in a half sprawling position. The front wheels had begun the slightest swerve.- In the back of his mind, as he kicked his heels together, Dimmitt was able to plot the curve on

the pavement, and figure that the huge seven inch tire would just about pass over the child's hips. A plaintive, weeping expression had appeared in the child's face by this time.

He stopped a moment. Perhaps it was physical exhaustion. The wild dance was fatiguing, for he was not accustomed to much exertion. He panted; and he wiped his forehead with his handkerchief. He sat down on the curb to rest.

The child's face had a most piteous expression. The heavy tire, with the three tons of metal behind it, was perhaps five feet away from the child. The horror of the impending juggernaut crashing down on him, was reflected in the boy's eyes. Anyone who could have resisted that, would have been made of stone. It was almost instinctive, seeing a human being under approaching wheels, to snatch him out from under them. One did it unconsciously. Professor Dimmitt gradually recollected himself.

"This silly business won't bring back my wife and girl," he said to himself. "And I'm making a big fool of myself."

He determined to get the boy out of the way, put him back in the yard, and forget the whole business, before it was too late. Who wanted the murder of a small boy on his soul? He looked again at the boy and the car.

He was horrified to see that the car was perceptibly moving, creeping toward its tiny victim. He started to rise briskly, from his seat on the curb, to pick up the boy, but found that his motions were laggard. It was difficult to move. It felt like trying to move in a frustration-dream. The accelerator was being eliminated. He had been a long time away from his laboratory. Its effect was passing off.

He made a desperate effort. His muscles, sore from his unwonted exertion of a moment ago, creaked with the work into which he urged them. He found himself progressing toward the boy at a very slow walk.

His mind was still working. He looked ahead. The car was four feet away from the boy. He also was four feet from the boy. His own motion, compared with that of the car, was certainly no faster and was rapidly becoming slower.

He was too late! The sinking sensation overwhelmed him that he had started this, he could not prevent its occurring, and he would be forced to stand there and witness the revolting act of madness that he had planned, at a time when he was not himself. Why, the huge car would crush the boy flat to the pavement, no thicker than a pancake. There would be blood, and crunching of bones, and perhaps his metabolism would be slowed down

enough so that he could hear the boy shriek. A bloody mass would be picked up off the street and carried away.

And, horrors! He would be found there, right beside the spot. How could he explain it? Graw had seen him behind the boy. Now here he was. In a few moments there would be plenty of witnesses. He would be tried and hanged!

The professor swayed with weakness.

However, his methodical mind did not desert him. Repeatedly he had reminded his students, during the course of a lecture, that if they found themselves in a serious emergency in which their time was limited, the best thing they could do toward solving it efficiently, was to sit down and spend half of the available time in thinking. He stopped his panic just as we shut off a light with a switch. He closed his eyes, and began to reason a way out of the pickle.

The first thing that occurred to him was that the saving of the little lad's life was the more important of his problems. What became of him mattered less. He opened his eyes again, and the looming, bulging tire of the front wheel was only a yard away from the little fellow's hips.

There came the thought that when he had given himself the

injection he had held a syringe in his hand a moment. What had he done with it? He looked down at himself. For the first time he noted that he was still in his gray laboratory smock. Desperately he reached into the pocket. There was the syringe, needle and all. The drug had acted so quickly that he had not had time to think; unconsciously he had put it into his pocket.

He took it out and looked it over. It was empty! And the supply bottle from which he filled it, stood on the work-table in the laboratory.

But, no, it was not empty. The tube was large, and still contained some of the solution. There was a thin layer of the yellow stuff between the end of the plunger and the bottom of the barrel. This amount in a 10cc syringe, might be considerable. The effective dose, sixty milligrams, after all, was a small amount. The only remaining problem was how to get that small amount out of the syringe.

Simple, if you went at it step by step. By rinsing it out with blood from his vein. His sleeve was still rolled up from his first injection. He plunged the needle into the vein, and drew out the plunger. Now he had to wait, because the blood flowed in slowly. He glanced up at the boy. Another foot had been lost. It seemed that the huge car was upon him!

Again he looked down so that he could not see it. The syringe was full of dark, venous blood. He forced it as hard as he could back into the vein, drew out the syringe and dropped it on the pavement, holding his thumb over the site of puncture. Then he desperately turned his eyes toward the boy, who somehow seemed to him doomed.

Slowly the tire crept toward the little body, which also slowly moved. In fact, the movements were more rapid than a moment ago; he could see the tire revolve and its heavy black tread descend slowly toward the boy. Then, suddenly, a foot away from him, it stopped, as though suddenly paralyzed. Again, everything was frozen, solid, motionless, rigid.

Dimmitt drew a deep breath. The accelerator had worked again. The foot of space between the wheel and the boy remained unchanged, while he walked over, took the boy away, and set him down in his own front yard. He himself hastily departed from the scene, fearing that the small dose he had taken would not last long, and he did not want to be found anywhere in the vicinity.

He felt a sudden grateful peace within himself as he headed back toward his laboratory. He had not felt this way for many weeks. All ideas of revenge were gone.

"Foolish way of sapping one's powers by emotional indul-

gence," it now appeared. He was through with it. He had shed it like an old garment. Now he was in a position to devote his full strength to research, with no thought of money.

He felt exalted as he hurried through the petrified streets, where everything looked precisely in the same positions as it had been when he had started out. A lady in a red coat and cap was still standing at the curb waiting for a chance to get across the street. A very young student still stood with a match to his cigarette.

Dimmitt went into the laboratory, where he lay down on a cot. He was trembling from his emotional conflict, and he was exhausted from his physical effort. He forced himself to relax with his eyes shut.

He was aroused by the noise of the traffic from without. Going to the window, he could see the busy street swarming and whirling again. The clock said 5:40. The whole thing had taken ten minutes. He felt tremendously exhausted, and lay down and rested again.

It was late in the evening when he approached his lonely apartment. But he had a feeling of peace on earth, good will toward men, which even included Graw. He decided to regard Graw as an unfortunate accident of Nature that could not help being what it

was. He could treat him charitably the next time they met. He regarded himself as the bigger man, now.

A newsboy was loudly bawling an "Extry" up the street, as though he would wake the dead. Dimmitt was usually not interested in "Extrys," but something in the boy's incoherently bawled quotations from the headlines

struck a chord. He bought a paper.

"Big Boss Dies of Stroke" the headlines said. "Mike Graw, prominent contractor and political leader, succumbed to a heart attack today at 5:30, while driving his car, and within sight of his home. He managed to stop his car, but was dead when reached by a passer-by who saw him fall out of the seat." The End

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# EDDIE FOR SHORT

BY WALLACE WEST

*Wallace West certainly isn't the only top sf writer who's done at least one classic on the Last-Man-in-the-World theme—see "The Last Man" in the big April, 1966 issue, our 40th Anniversary number—but he could very well be the only one to have done another gem, "Eddie for Short," on the distaff side of the same premise. What, West wonders, if the last woman in the world were a nineteen-year-old torch singer pouring out her heart nightly over station WGBS-Miami, her husband dead in the control room upstairs and the entire planet swept clean of all life—except the insects and herself?*

*"'Cause I ain't got nobody,  
And nobody cares for me."*

LITA closed her eyes as she ended the old song. After a long moment she opened them to their dewy widest; smiled as though she knew a heartwarming secret; slid like a panther kitten from the top of the concert grand. Standing tall as a reed, she searched the floor with bare toes for her shoes.

That little-girl gesture always wowed the cash customers. They loved it, too, when she eased herself to the piano top as her turn began, displaying suntanned shoulders and a startling length of leg. They often cried into their Martinis as she cradled the microphone like a rag doll, kicked off her pumps because "I can't breathe right with shoes on, folks"





and sang torch songs of the '20's in that unbelievable contralto.

But tonight the cash customers were absent from the Copa'. Only an automatic, fixed-focus TV camera stared at her with detached lechery as a phonograph finished the accompaniment.

"Goodnight, kind friends, wherever you may be," the girl signed off in a beckoning whisper. "See you tomorrow . . . huhm?"

Just before the Off-The-Air tell-tale winked she turned and swayed out of the "spot" in calm defiance of the rule that no feminine performer ever turns her back to an audience. (Lita's flat, uncorseted hips could retreat without shame, Bill said.)

Bill!

She crumpled against the silk-brocaded wall of the night club; clung there a second in the semi-darkness. Then she snatched the studio phone; jiggled the hook madly. Please God Bill still could answer!

"Lita!" Her radio engineer husband's voice was as slurred as though he had been drinking heavily. "Caught your act after all. 'Swunn'erful as usual, honey. You're bes' li'l trouper in th' world . . . in whole wide world."

"Don't let go!" She kept her own voice steady with tremendous effort. "I'm coming right over."

"Stay 'way from here!" Bill gritted. "We've been over all that before. Can't do thing for me.

Nobody can. Ol' Demon Carbon 14 caught up with me at last, even if my granddaddy *was* a hoss."

"But there must be something!"

"Nothing. I'm nine-tenths dead right now. I'm not in pain . . . jus' messy. I don' want you see me this way or try move my body. I like it 'ere in Master Control, with th' lights winkin' an' shinin' down on me." For a moment the words came clear and sharp: "If you risk contamination by coming here, I'll haunt you, Lita, so help me. And I'll bring along a whole army of little red demons. Don't you know who you are, Mrs. William Howard Day?"

"I only know I love you."

"I love you too. But don't forget that, so far as we know, you're the last woman left alive on earth."

"What does that matter if you. . . ?"

"Matters helluva lot." His voice blurred again. "Maybe human race *has* tried its damndest commit suicide. Can't let it do stupid thing like that, can we? Can't jus' quit an' let th' croc's take over can we . . . so long as there's single chance?"

"No?"

"Course not. Know million good reasons why not. But time's runnin' out." She had to press the receiver tightly to her ear to hear him now. "Here's what I' done. Leavin' th' WGBS carrier

wave on permanent'. It'll run until Miami's atomic power plant breaks down . . . maybe year or so. Hookin' in th' shortwave an' TV transmitters. Th' network's down but anyone, most anywhere, can spot a 50,000 watt carrier an' follow it . . . follow it . . . Wait a minute, honey. Gotta take some medicine . . . if I can fin' my damn mouth. Don't go 'way."

"I'll never go 'way, Bill," she sobbed. "I'll be right here always."

"Atta girl." He spoke clearly again for a moment. "Well, I figure carrier's not enough. World's in a mess. Gotta give more incentive have somebody find you. So you must keep singin', see? Rigged up a time clock thing. It'll switch in the Copa' ever' night at nine, jus' like always. An' ever' night you climb up on the roost an' sing, jus' like always."

"No! No, Bill!" This time she did scream. "Bill, I couldn't."

"Could too. Gotta! If there's a single man alive anywhere who's near a workin' radio, he'll hear you sooner, later. He'll come to that voice. Even if he has to walk through boilin' pitch. He'll come, jus' like I came alla way from . . . where I come from, honey?"

"From China," she husked. "Oh Bill, For God's sake . . ."

"Yeah. I keep forgettin' now. God's sake . . . 'Manity's sake, too. An' I don't care whether he's

yellow, or black, or pea-green and has bat ears an' cross eyes. If he comes you, uh, marry him. See? Show mus' go on. All that."

"No!" The girl sank to her knees on the parqueted floor.

"Yes!" The voice was so weak now it seemed coming already from the other side of the grave. "Promise. Quick! 'Scomin' up signoff time for . . . for . . ."

"I promise, sweetheart." She knelt, slim and proud again, as though in the light from some unearthly "spot." "I promise."

"Knew you would . . . hon." The receiver rattled and choked.

A green-eyed, long-legged, empty-hearted girl walked the streets of "America's Playground."

The streets were empty, too. When the radioactive gas cloud swept across the nation it had sterilized the city of all but insect life.

Where were the piled corpses, the wrecked cars, the evidence of last-minute frenzied looting that prophets of doom always had warned of? Miami's City Fathers had been clever about that. Fearing that an epidemic would follow wide-scale radiation deaths, they spread the word early that Hell Bomb gas tended to concentrate in the canyons of city streets. There might be a chance to escape, or recover, they said, if one went out into the country.

So the wretched Miamians, as they sickened and watched the pale blood start oozing through their sun-varnished skins, fled to the Keys, to the 'Glades, even to the despised and frigid North. They fled in their shiny Cadillacs and Jaguars, their picture-windowed house trailers or their beaten-up Jeeps; via their aerial Route of the Stars and their Seaboard Airline Railway. Even as they fled, they died.

"And civilization fell upon the young men," Lita paraphrased the Book of Job, "and they are dead: And I only am escaped to tell you."

A pity, she thought as she walked the shining, antiseptic streets, that the Fathers had not lived to appreciate the success of their greatest publicity stunt.

Sometimes, when the sun was high, she delighted her woman's heart by wandering through cool shops where the wealth of nations lay heaped and forgotten. Or, in a book store, she brushed aside stacks of murder mysteries and "light summer reading" in vain search of some volume containing a key to the catastrophe.

It had been such a neat little war, over in a far corner of Asia. New weapons had been tested and perfected there. Beardless boys had been hardened into reckless killers, and surplus products disposed of without the necessity for cutting prices. The neat little war

had gone on for almost a generation. Everyone except the boys and their parents had come to take it for granted. Something to be deplored, like sin, but nothing to fret about, really.

Then, one still winter night, someone, somewhere, had tossed an atom bomb over the Pole at an European capital. (The bomb fragments, they said, bore Latin characters.) And someone else, somewhere, had tossed an atom bomb over the Pole at an American industrial center . . . Detroit, wasn't it? (Those fragments, the experts said, bore Cyrillic characters.)

The next day . . . Christmas Day, 1964 . . . the Hell Bombs fell. Thirteen spaced evenly along the Pacific Coasts of North and South America and, by coincidence, thirteen more along the Atlantic Coast of Europe and Africa.

The West Wind did the rest.

Lita, who read poetry over the air now and then, remembered how men had scattered before that wild west wind, "like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing."

Ghosts! She would hurry her steps when that thought came, never looking behind her.

Sometimes, instead of walking, she would take her car . . . a Cambridge blue MG . . . and drive to a beach. It was less lonely near the water. There was life there. Would the sharks, or the

croc's, as Bill had suggested, some day climb out of that water as men had once done? She shuddered. Nevertheless she missed Bill less while she was swimming.

She swam well, as all singers do, thanks to her splendid chest development. At first she wore a suit, true to her prim upbringing in the orphanage. One day she forgot to put it on. And after that she didn't bother much with clothes in the daytime and became golden brown all over in the warm spring sunshine.

At night things were different, of course. She dressed in the loveliest evening gowns she could find in the shops—a new one each day. She put a hibiscus flower behind her left ear. She made up with the same care she had used when the club was packed to the doors and waiters were jamming little tables between the knees of the ringsiders. And she sang to all those who would never hear her again.

"Bill," from Show Boat, was her theme song. It had been ever since that night when the real Bill, still in uniform, had committed the unpardonable sin of threading his way among the ringside tables, lifting her from the piano after she had finished that number, and kissing her soundly while the customers cheered.

How long ago had that been?

Why, only a month! They had been married a week later, as soon as Bill was sure he could return to his old job at WGBS. Another week of bliss, apartment hunting, buying a few sticks of furniture, getting settled, lovemaking . . . And then the Hell Bombs fell.

Sunk in a dream that added poignancy to her singing, Lita cradled the mike and wandered, as the spirit moved her, through the favorites nobody ever got enough of: "I'm Falling in Love with Someone," "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man" and, for a change in pace, "Summertime."

*"One of these mornin's you goin' to rise up singin',  
Then you'll spread yo' wings an' you'll take the sky.  
But till that mornin' there's a nothin' can harm you  
With Daddy an' Mammy standin' by."*

Why, she wondered, had so few songs like that been written in recent years? Perhaps Daddy an' Mammy had turned their backs on children who never stopped squabbling among themselves. Certainly there had been no singin' as all humanity took to the sky that mornin' when the gas came.

Stop it, she told herself. Don't get cynical. So the orphanage *had* been a poor substitute for her physicist father who had died a year-long death after an early

atomic test bomb had exploded prematurely out on the New Mexican desert. It had been a poor, prim substitute, too, for the mother she had never known. But the Sisters *had* let her sing at that recital where the manager of the Copa' had heard her. That had led to Bill. And maybe, as he thought, some mutation in her father's irradiated germ plasm had made her, and perhaps her children, immune to the after-effects of alpha, beta and gamma rays.

Her children!

For long moments she sat silent on the piano top, staring into the glazed eye of the TV pickup. Well, if Bill hoped there was a chance that a few others had survived . . . She owed him that, dear soul, up there across the street with the lights of Master Control winkin' and shinin' down on him as he lay across the console as though asleep.

She jerked her mind away. Three times in as many days since his death she had found herself standing with her hand on the knob of the WGBS Master Control Room door. And three times the winking ON THE AIR! KEEP OUT! sign had stopped her.

Inside that door lay madness. And there was no time for madness.

She shook herself savagely. As the Standby light beside the

Copa' microphone flickered another kind of warning she swept, heartbroken and magnificent, into her last number:

*"Some enchanted evening*

*You may see a stranger . . ."*

On and on she drove herself, white-faced, to the climax:

*"Once you have found him,*

*Never . . . let . . . him . . . go."*

In a state of near-collapse she slid to the floor, searched for her shoes, and bade the ghosts farewell. She fled from the dim club out into the bright street.

What would happen, she wondered as she pulled herself together, on that final night when the power plant failed as it was bound to do eventually. . . ? When the streets would be darkened forever? She clenched her teeth and ran all the way home . . . home to the apartment she and Bill had chosen because it was so cheerful and so close to the club and the station.

But the street lights, as well as the Nemo signal on the orchestra stand, remained faithful. At dusk, electric eyes turned on the tall standards bordering the boulevards and Biscayne Bay. They switched on the proud Cadillac signs and the glow in grimy store windows. And at dawn they extinguished them all in thrifty fashion.

Bulbs were beginning to burn out. A short circuit had started a

fire that gutted several blocks in the northern part of town. But, on the whole, Miami still turned its impersonal, white-toothed smile of welcome to an empty sea. Palm fronds blew, whispering, about the streets sometimes. That was offset by accumulating dust that made Lita's footsteps almost inaudible.

Then, one night as she was walking just a little faster than necessary through a dark spot, she heard the echo.

Startled out of a reverie, she stopped short. There was no sound except her rapid breath. Laughing a little, she went on. Was she really expecting that man with the bat ears and cross eyes to accost her?

The echo had returned!

In just a moment now she would turn and look to see where it was coming from. Ten more steps . . . Fifteen . . . Fifty . . . But that street light had burned out, too, since last night.

Maybe it was a shark, or a croc', coming out of the sea or the swamp to survey its new kingdom? So soon?

For heaven's sake, Lita. Turn and look right now. You're acting like a child. You're acting . . . The poem came unbidden:

*"Like one that on a lonesome road  
Doth walk in fear and dread,  
And having once turned round,  
walks on,*

*And turns no more his head;  
Because he knows a frightful fiend  
Doth close behind him tread."*

Lita kicked off her pumps and fled, like a benighted Diana, through the dust. The echo footsteps speeded, too, but could not match her. Only when the girl had reached the entrance to her apartment building, a vantage point that somehow gave her a feeling of security, did she dare look back.

Far down the street a black shadow pursued her. She gripped the doorhandle; stood her ground panting, heart drumming against her ribs. Whatever it was that came, she must see it clearly or live in terror forevermore.

A huge dog? No! It ran on its hind legs.

Then it crouched low for a moment and her misgivings returned.

It rose to its feet again. Even in the spotty lighting she could see, now, that it was human. A man? Coming in answer to her songs? Bill had been right! Would he be yellow or green as a vegetable?" She tried to smile but only made a face.

No! Not green! Her hands were pressing against her smooth throat now to stifle a scream.

Black! Black as a broken street light!

And old . . . incredibly, crookedly old.

And not even a man! She let out her held breath in a great sigh.

Another woman! Thank God!

"Doan need be afeared o' me, honey," a cracked voice called from somewhere among the rainbows that had started wheeling before her eyes. "See, I picked up yer shoes an' brung 'em along . . . Lawsy! Whatsa matter with you, chile!"

Lita recovered consciousness to find herself lying in her own bed upstairs. Beside her sat an old Negro woman. Her eyes, in an incredibly wrinkled face, were as sharp and excited as if she had just seen the glory of the Lord.

"Who are you? How did you get here? What do you want?" Lita sat up, to find that she had been undressed and put properly to bed.

"Name of Verna Smith," the crone grinned, snaggletoothed and benevolent. "Ah come from down Key West way. My man was a shrimp fisher, till . . ." She shuddered and held out her fists to something invisible, the thumbs thrust between the first and second fingers.

"One night Ah hears you singin' when Ah jus' happens to turn on one o' them battery radios in a store down theah. Ah reconize you right off 'cause mah man usta lissen to you a lot w'en he was blue. Firs', Ah figure dat Miami ain't been hit. An den Ah knows it has been or you wouldn't be a singin' so lonesome like. Ah figure you need somebody take care o'

you. An' here Ah am. Took more time'n Ah counted on, what with th' busses not runnin' an' ever'-thing."

"That was awfully nice of you . . . Mrs. Smith." Lita felt warm clear down to her toes, so warm that she broke the old Southern taboo against calling Negroes "Mrs."

"Jus' call me Verna, ma'am."

"And you call me Lita. I'm sorry I ran away from you. And fainting like that! I can't imagine what got into me."

"You can't ma' . . . Lita, honey?" The old woman's eyes became even brighter and her smile spread almost from ear to ear."

"No. I'm strong as an ox."

"You doan know you gonna have a baby, chile?"

"A baby!" For a moment Lita seemed about to faint again. "How do you know?"

"Ol' Verna ain't been a midwife all these years fo' nothin'."

"Oh no!" Lita began to laugh wildly. "Next week 'East Lynne'! But you're wrong, Verna. I'm not going to have *a* baby. I'm going to have twins — a boy and a girl — and we'll call them Adam and Eve."

Sunlit days flowed by. Hushed days when no bird sang. Days when only the chirping of crickets and the perfume of flowers testified that a part of the world still

lived. Nights punctuated by the brief, brave, useless night club interval. For Lita knew it was useless. If only one person had answered her call by this time it would not be answered again.

Yet she clung to the ritual, putting her heart and magnificent throat into the old repertoire . . . even adding new numbers. Somewhere Bill must be listening.

For weeks after Verna came and insisted on taking over the few household chores, Lita did little else but swim, or drive along the shore through haunts of the wealthy dead in Palm Beach, Fort Lauderdale and Miami Beach. There the marble pools already were encrusted with algae, the Afromobiles were idle, the Fountain of Youth dried up. Or she would sit in the spring sun and dream, like a brown female Budha with a poodle cut.

But, as months passed and she felt life stirring within her, the girl became subtly worried. It wouldn't be enough to bring a brace of young savages into the world. (She knew she would bear twins. God couldn't be cruel enough to ordain otherwise!) The children would have to be educated to rebuild civilization, a better civilization. Yet their mother knew so little . . . so little. A smattering of high school; never completed.

She literally hurled herself at the City Library and, when its endless stacks confused and fright-

ened her, at the texts she found in The University of Miami. She began with the grandiose idea that she somehow must ground herself in science . . . in physics . . . and find the magic to ward off another atomic cloud.

The equations remained hen tracks. She left them; turned to economics, to sociology, to psychology. Lita was nobody's fool. Yet, without a teacher, she lost her way in endless bypaths to knowledge. So much learning! And she but one small woman!

History was better. But it justified everything — murder, war, famine, fascism and pestilence — all were for the best in the best possible of worlds. All, from the viewpoint of history, were inevitable, even as the Hell Bomb had become inevitable, once atomic fission and fusion had been left in the hands of the merchants of death.

One of the bypaths she followed led her, though, to the bright world of Greek drama and poetry. Here was music expressed in words . . . expressed in a way that she could comprehend. She dropped her other studies and, all through the hot summer months read the ancient authors — Homer, Xenophon, Aristophanes, Euripides, Sophocles. But especially Herodotus, with his prose songs of how it was the custom for brothers and sisters to marry in Egypt; of the curse that the wealth of Croesus



brought upon its owner; of how, during the Persian War, Themistocles made the craven Greeks into a nation of heroes by the simple, brutal process of beating their stupid heads together.

Often she read snatches aloud to Verna, at first not dreaming that the Negro would understand anything more than the rhythm of the words. The old woman amazed her by rocking back and forth, arms around her shrunken knees and grizzled head nodding in glee.

"Doan tell me, chile!" she would exclaim. "Doan tell me! 'Way back three thousand years, an' soon as folks get a little money in de bank dey start cuttin' up. Dat's firs' thing you gotta teach the twins. Money made to be spent, have good time with, not to save an' fight fo' with razors."

"You do think I'll have twins, Verna?"

"Lands sakes alive, chile. You still worritin' about dat? I gotta wanga . . . dat's Voodoo charm my man brung from Haiti once. Wanga says you gonna have twins."

"Do you believe in Voodoo?"

"Course Ah doan. Jus' th' same, Ah doan make no faces at Papa Legba when it's dahk!"

Came the time, in mild September, when Lita found she could not lift herself to the top of the Copa' piano with her old lithe grace. Came the time when she

would have much preferred to go to bed at nightfall than sing for all the ghosts in Christendom.

And yet she sang . . . lullabies mostly, now, to get in training . . . as she would continue to sing so long as the telltale light beckoned her to the mike. She was not superstitious. Yet she knew that disaster would strike, did she break her word to Bill. Voodoo? Well, so be it! .

Came a day, late in September, that was humid and hot and still.

"Hurricane weather," muttered Verna, making a sign. "You better stay home tonight, honey. You is near your time an' they's a big bull blow headin' dis way, mark my word."

Evening crept in sullenly. Sharp gusts of wind whipped the palms and rattled the jalousies. Verna wrung her worn hands but Lita insisted on making her shapelessness as presentable as possible in a sequined black evening dress made for a dowager.

"I have to go," she whimpered stubbornly, even as a shout of wind heralded the near approach of the storm. "We'll drive, though. We'll be home before it gets really bad."

She was wrong. Hardly had they reached the club when the storm leaped yowling at them like a great cat. It whisked the top off the MG with one paw and slammed the little car over the curb and against the side of a

building with the other. As they dragged themselves out of the wreck and under the protection of the club portico, rain descended like a theater curtain, so dense that the few remaining street lights seemed extinguished.

"You hurt, honey chile?" panted the black woman as she guided the other inside and fought to close the foyer door.

"No." Lita answered through clenched teeth. "I can go on." She gasped, bent forward in agony and snatched at a chair for support.

The hurricane was screaming like a banshee tangled in the tops of the skyscrapers. Palms splintered, crashed and skidded along the sidewalks. A sign toppled into the street and rolled, a monstrous cartwheel.

"Stay outside, you Papa Legba," Verna shouted back at the storm as she set her thin shoulder to the door. "Doan you go botherin' dis pore gal tonight. She got enough on her min'."

The door inched into its frame and latched. The brocade hangings, which had been flapping like wings, folded along the walls.

"We're late," Lita gasped. "See. The light is on. Bill's waiting!"

She stumbled toward the piano. Halfway across the floor she moaned and crumpled.

"Here. Ah help you." Verna lifted the stricken girl and halfled, half-carried her toward the

Ladies' Lounge. "Jus' doan you be skeered. Verna take care o' you."

"But I'm on the air," Lita whimpered. "Please . . . The show . . ."

At that moment the full force of the storm was unleashed. The glass in the foyer door smashed inward. Water poured after it, as though sprayed from a fire hose."

The house lights dimmed, flickered and went out. The Nemo tell-tale lingered, an accusing green eye. Then it, too, was gone. Lita screamed.

Verna dragged her the rest of the way to the Lounge.

The pain ebbed at last and flowed away. Lita roused to full consciousness, utterly spent. She caught the gleam of a flashlight out of the corner of her eye.

"Verna?" she called against the muted thunder of the storm.

"You feel better, honey chile?" The crone hovered over her.

"I . . . Yes, I guess so . . . How are the . . . twins?"

Verna stood silent, the flash trembling in her hands.

"There are twins?" Lita struggled to sit up but was pushed firmly back among the cushions of what must be a divan.

"No'm." Despite her efforts, the Negro's voice rose to a wail. "Not twins, honey."

Lita turned her face to the wall and let slow tears smear her

cheeks. Again she was a little girl in pigtails, back at the orphanage. She had been punished by being shut in a dark closet for some infraction of the mysterious, inflexible rules. Illogically, savagely, she blamed herself. God, or that impersonal Fate the ancient Greeks believed in, had turned a cold back upon her because she had broken the troupers' code that the show must go on.

"It's a girl," she said at last. Obviously the brat must be a woman child; one who would stare accusingly at her in her old age; one who would hate her for having been brought into a dead world.

"No'm," Verna soothed her. "It's a boy. Healthy as a cricket, too, honey. Must weigh all o' nine pound."

A boy! Lita's world turned over once more. The tears stopped flowing. She stared up at the dim ceiling in abject terror and listened to the wind which was shaking the building and the rain that lashed it with whips.

A boy? Under her wet eyelids she was witnessing the destruction of a great city which no one had battened down against the storm. Trees uprooted. Windows smashed and the baubles behind them soaked to trash. Sheet-iron and aluminum roofs ripped off in long strips, rolled into monstrous cylinders and tossed into the streets to charge up and down like juggernauts . . .

No. Not juggernauts. Like flapping Furies in pursuit of Oedipus. Scourging Oedipus because he had committed incest with his mother? Nonsense! Scourging the world for daring to commit suicide, leaving the altars of the gods empty of incense and sacrifices.

She began laughing hysterically . . . laughing like a Fury herself.

Verna, thinking to quiet her, brought the child kicking in its swaddling of torn brocade; held it under the flashlight beam for her to see.

"What you gonna call yo' son, Miz Lita?" she pleaded.

"Does he need a name, poor thing?" The girl fought her hysteria down.

"Sho' do," the old woman whispered as a dazzle of lightning outlined the lounge door. "Have baby in a hurricane, better name him quick or mebbe you doan have a chance."

Lita stared at the door as though waiting for the crackling flashes to illuminate her future. Perhaps, in spite of everything, someone, somewhere, was coming to her over the rim of the dead world.

And if not? Well, she was young . . . barely nineteen. There was still time . . . plenty of time to keep her promise to Bill . . . Furies or no Furies.

"We'll call him Eddie," she said. "Eddie for short."

(Continued from page 69)

—one size—took a navy vessel.”

\* \* \*

Saxo glittered white among the myriads. But it was still so far that others outshone it. Brightest stood Betelgeuse. Flandry's gaze fell on that crimson spark and lingered. He sat at the pilot board, chin in hand, for many minutes; and only the throb of the engine and murmur of the ventilators was heard.

Persis entered the control room. During the passage she had tried to improvise a few glamorous changes of garment from the clothes in stock, but they were too resolutely utilitarian. So mostly, as now, she settled for a pair of shorts, and those mostly for the pockets. Her hair swept loose, dark-bright as space; a lock tickled him when she bent over his shoulder, and he sensed its faint sunny odor, and her own. But this time he made no response.

“Trouble, darling?” she asked.

“‘It ain't the work, it's them damn decisions,’” he quoted absently.

“You mean which way to go?”

“Yes. Here's where we settle the question. Saxo or Betelgeuse?”

“Saxo's the closer. Against heading there is the consideration they can keep a pretty sharp watch on it without openly using warcraft in the system. Any big, fast merchantman could gobble us, and the crew come aboard with

sidearms. However, if we were in call range, I might raise Terran HQ on Starkad and pass on the information we're carrying. Then we might hope the Merseians would see no further gain in damaging us. But the whole whing is awful iffy.

“Now Betelgeuse is an unaligned power, and very jealous of her neutrality. Foreign patrols will have to keep their distance, spread so thin we might well slip through. Once on Alfzar, we could report to the Terran ambassador. *But* the Betelgeuseans won't let use enter their system secretly. They maintain their own patrols. We'd have to go through traffic procedures, starting beyond orbital radius of the outermost planet. And the Merseians can monitor those com channels. A raider could dash in quick-like and blast us.”

“They wouldn't dare,” Persis said.

“Sweetheart, they dare practically anything, and apologize later. You don't know what's at stake.”

She sat down beside him. “Because you won't tell me.”

“Right.”

He had gnawed his way to the truth. Hour upon hour, as they fled through Merseia's dominions, he hunched with paper, penstyl, calculator, and toiled. Their flight involved nothing dramatic. It simply meandered

through regions where one could assume their enemies rarely came. Why should beings with manlike biological requirements go from a dim red dwarf star to a planetless blue giant to a dying Cepheid variable? Flandry had ample time for his labors.

Persis was complaining about that when the revelation came. "You might talk to me."

"I do," he muttered, not lifting his eyes from the desk. "But not right now, please!"

She flopped into a seat. "Do you recall what we have aboard for entertainment?" she said. "Four animations: a Martian travelogue, a comedian routine, a speech by the Emperor, and a Cynthian opera on the twenty-tone scale. Tow novels: *Outlaw Blastman* and *Planet of Sin*. I have them memorized. They come back to me in my dreams. Then there's a flute, which I can't play, and a set of operation manuals."

"M-hm." He tried putting Brechdan's figure in a different sequence. It had been easy to translate from Merseian to Terran arithmetic. But what the devil did the symbols refer to? Angles, times, several quantities with no dimensions specified... rotation? Of what? Not of Brechdan; no such luck.

"You don't have to solve the problem," Persis sulked. "You told me yourself, an expert can see the meaning at a glance.

You're just having fun."

Flandry raised his head, irritated. "Might be hellish important for us to know. Give us some idea what to expect. How in the name of Copros can Stark-ad matter so much? One lonesome planet!"

And the idea came to him.

He grew so rigid, he stared so wildly out into the universe, that Persis was frightened. "Nicky, what's wrong?" He didn't hear. With a convulsive motion, he grabbed a fresh sheet of paper and started scrawling. Finished, he stared at the result. Sweat stood on his brow. He rose, went into the control room, returned with a reel which he threaded into his microreader. Again he wrote, copying off numbers. His fingers danced on the desk computer. Persis held herself moveless.

Until at last he nodded. "That's it," he said in a cold small voice. "Has to be."

"What is?" she could then ask.

He twisted around in his chair. His eyes took a second to focus on her. Something had changed in his face. He was almost a stranger.

"I can't tell you," he said.

"Why not?"

"We might get captured alive. They'd probe you and find you knew. If they didn't murder you out of hand, they'd wipe your brain—which to my taste is worse."

He took a lighter from his pocket and burned every paper on the desk and swept the ashes into a disposal. Afterward he shook himself, like a dog that has come near drowning, and went to her.

"Sorry," he smiled. "Kind of a shock for me there. But I'm all right now. And I really will pay attention to you, from here on in."

She enjoyed the rest of the voyage, even after she had identified the change in him, the thing which had gone and would never quite come back. Youth.

## Chapter IX

The detector alarm buzzed. Persis drew a gasp and caught Flandry's arm. He tore her loose, reaching for the main hyperdrive switch.

But he didn't pull it, returning them to normal state and kinetic velocity. His knuckles stood white on the handle. A pulse fluttered in his throat. "I forgot what I'd already decided," he said. "We don't have an especially good detector. If she's a warship, we were spotted some time ago."

"But this time she can't be headed straight at us." Her tone was fairly level. She had grown somewhat used to being hunted. "We have a big sphere to hide in."

"Uh-huh. We'll try that if ne-

cessary. But first lets see which way yonder fellow is bound." He changed course. Stars wheeled in the viewports; otherwise there was no sensation. "If we can find a track on which the intensity stays constant, we'll be running parallel to him and he isn't trying to intercept." Saxo burned dead ahead. "S'pose he's going there—"

Minutes crawled. Flandry let himself relax. His coverall was wet. "Whew! What I hoped. Destination, Saxo. And if he's steered on a more or less direct line, as is probably, then he's come from the Empire."

He got busy, calculating, grumbling about rotten civilian instrumentation. "Yes, we can meet him. Let's go."

"But he could be Merseian," Persis objected. "He needn't have come from a Terran planet."

"Chance we take. The odds aren't bad. He's slower than us, which suggests a merchant vessel." Flandry set the new path, leaned back and stretched. A grin spread across his features. "My dilemma's been solved for me. We're off to Starkad."

"Why? How?"

"Didn't mention it before, for fear of raising false hopes in you. But I came here first, instead of directly to Saxo or Betelgeuse, because this is the way Terran ships pass, carrying men and supplies to Starkad and returning home. If

we can hitch a ride . . . you see?"

Eagerness blossomed in her and died again. "Why couldn't we have found one going home?"

"Be glad we found any whatsoever. Besides, this way we deliver our news a lot sooner." Flandry rechecked his figures. "We'll be in call range in an hour. If he should prove to be Merseian, chances are we can outspeed and lose him." He rose. "I decree a good stiff drink."

\* \* \*

The ship was the freighter *Rieskessel*, registered on Nova Germania but operating out of the Imperial frontier world Irumclaw. She was a huge, potbellied, ungainly and unkempt thing, with a huge, potbellied, ungainly and unkempt captain. He bellowed a not quite sober welcome when Flandry and Persis came aboard. "Oh, ho, ho, ho! Humans! So soon I did not expect seeing humans. And never this gorgeous." One hairy hand engulfed Flandry's the other chucked Persis under the chin. "Otto Brummelmann is me."

Flandry looked past the bald, wildly bearded head, down the passageway from the airlock. Corroded metal shuddered to the drone of an ill-tuned engine. A pair of multi-limbed beings with shiny blue integuments stared back from their labor; they were actually swabbing by hand. The

lights were reddish orange, the air held a metallic tang and was chilly enough for his breath to smoke. "Are you the only Terran, sir?" he asked.

"Not Terran. Not me. Germanian. But for years now on Irumclaw. My owners want Irumclagian spacehands, they come cheaper. No human language do I hear from end to end of a trip. They can't pronounce." Brummelmann kept his little eyes on Persis, who had donned her one gown, and tugged at his own soiled tunic in an effort at getting some wrinkles out. "Lonely, lonely. How nice to find you. First we secure your boat, next we go for drinks in my cabin, right?"

"We'd better have a private talk immediately, sir," Flandry said. "Our boat—no, let's wait till we're alone."

"You wait. I be alone with the little lady, right? Ho, ho, ho!" Brummelmann swept a paw across her. She shrank back in distaste.

On the way, the captain was stopped by a crew member who had some question. Flandry took the chance to hiss in Persis' ear: "Don't offend him. This is fantastic luck."

"This?" Her nose wrinkled.

"Yes. Think. No matter what happens, none of these xenos'll give us away. They can't. All we have to do is stay on the good side of the skipper, and that

shouldn't be overly hard."

He had seen pigpens, in historical dramas, better kept up than Brummelmann's cabin. The Germanian filled three mugs, ignoring coffee stains, with a liquid that sank fangs into stomachs. His got half emptied on the first gulp. "Sol!" he belched. "We talk. Who sent you to deep space in a gig?"

Persis took the remotest corner. Flandry stayed near Brummelmann, studying him. The man was a failure, a bum, an alcoholic wreck. Doubtless he kept his job because the owners insisted on a human captain and couldn't get anyone else at the salary they wanted to pay. Didn't matter greatly, as long as the mate had some competence. For the most part, antiquated though her systems must be, the ship ran herself.

"You are bound for Starkad, aren't you, sir?" Flandry asked.

"Yes, yes. My company has a Naval contract. Irumclaw is a transshipment point. This trip we carry food and construction equipment. I hope we go on another run soon. Not much pleasure in Highport. But we was to talk about you."

"I can't say anything except that I'm on a special mission. It's vital for me to reach Highport secretly. If Donna d'Io and I can ride down with you, and you haven't radioed the fact ahead,

you'll have done the Empire a tremendous service."

"Special mission . . . with a lady?" Brummelmann dug a black-rimmed thumb into Flandry's ribs. "I can guess what sort of mission. Ho, ho, ho!"

"I rescued her," Flandry said patiently. "That's why we were in a boat. A Merseian attack. The war's sharpening. I have urgent information for Admiral Enriques."

Brummelmann's laughter choked off. Behind the matted whiskers, that reached to his navel, he swallowed. "Attack, you said? But no, the Merseians, they have never bothered civilian ships."

"Nor should they bother this one, Captain. Not if they don't know I'm aboard."

Brummelmann wiped his pate. Probably he thought of himself as being in the high, wild tradition of early spacefaring days. But now his daydreams had orbited. "My owners," he said weakly. "I have obligation to my owners. I am responsible for their ship."

"Your first duty is to the Empire." Flandry considered taking over at blaster point. No; not unless he must; too chancy. "And all you need do is approach Starkad in the usual fashion, make your usual landing at Highport, and let us off. The Merseians will never know, I swear."



"I—but I—"

Flandry snatched an idea from the air. "As for your owners," he said, "you can do them a good turn as well. Our boat had better be jettisoned out here. The enemy has her description. But if we take careful note of the spot, and leave her powerplant going for neutrino tracing, you can pick her up on your way home and sell her there. She's worth as much as this entire ship, I'll bet." He winked. "Of course, you'll inform your owners."

Brummelmann's eyes gleamed. "Well. So. Of course." He tossed off the rest of his drink. "By God, yes! Shake!"

He insisted on shaking hands with Persis also. "Ugh," she said to Flandry when they were alone, in an emptied locker where a mattress had been laid. She had refused the captain's offer of his quarters. "How long to Starkad?"

"Couple days," Flandry busied himself checking the spacesuits he had removed from the boat before she was cast adrift.

"I don't know if I can stand it."

"Sorry, but we've burned our britches. Myself, I stick by my claim that we lucked out."

"You have the strangest ideas of luck," she sighed. "Oh, well, matters can't get any worse."

They could.

Fifteen hours later, Flandry and Persis were in the saloon. Cover-

alled against the chill but nonetheless shivering, mucous membranes aching from the dryness, they tried to pass time with a game of rummy. They weren't succeeding very well.

Brummelmann's voice boomed hoarse from the intercom: "You! Ensign Flandry! To the bridge!"

"Huh?" He sprang up. Persis followed his dash, down halls and through a companionway. Stars glared from the viewports. Because the optical compensator was out of adjustment, they had strange colors and were packed fore and aft, as if the ship moved through another reality.

Brummelmann held a wrench. Beside him, his first mate aimed a laser torch, a crude substitute for a gun but lethal enough at short range. "Hands high!" the captain shrilled.

Flandry's arms lifted. Sickness caught at his gullet. "What is this?"

"Read." Brummelmann thrust a printout at him. "You liar, you traitor, thought you could fool me? Look what came."

It was a standard form, transcribed from a hypercast that must have originated in one of several automatic transmitters around Saxo. *Office of Vice Admiral Juan Enriques, commanding Imperial Terrestrial Naval forces in region* — Flandry's glance flew to the text.

*General directive issued under*

*martial law: By statement of his Excellency Lord Markus Hauksberg, Viscount of Ny Kalmar on Terra, special Imperial delegate to the Roidhunate of Merseia . . . Ensign Dominic Flandry, an officer of his Majesty's Navy attached to the delegation . . . mutinied and stole a spaceboat belonging to the realm of Ny Kalmar; description as follows . . . charged with high treason . . . Pursuant to interstellar law and Imperial policy. Ensign Flandry is to be apprehended and returned to his superiors on Merseia . . . All ships, including Terran, will be boarded by Merseian inspectors before proceeding to Starkad . . . Terrans who may apprehend this criminal are to deliver him promptly, in their own persons, to the nearest Merseian authority . . . secrets of state—*

Persis closed her eyes and strained fingers together. The blood had left her face.

"Well?" Brummelmann growled. "Well, what have you to say for yourself?"

Flandry leaned against the bulkhead. He didn't know if his legs would uphold him. "I . . . can say . . . that bastard Brechdan thinks of everything."

"You expected you could fool me? You thought I would do your traitor's work? No, no!"

Flandry looked from him, to the mate, to Persis. Weakness

vanished in rage. But his brain stayed machine precise. He lowered the hand which held the flimsy. "I'd better tell you the whole truth," he husked.

"No, I don't want to hear, I want no secrets,"

Flandry let his knees go. As he fell, he yanked out his blaster. The torch flame boomed blue where he had been. His own snap shot flared off that tool. The mate yowled and dropped the red-hot thing. Flandry regained his feet. "Get rid of your wrench," he said.

It clattered on the deck. Brummelmann backed off, past his mate who crouched and keened in pain. "You cannot get away," he croaked. "We are detected by now. Surely we are. You make us turn around, a warship comes after."

"I know," Flandry said. His mind leaped as if across ice floes. "Listen. This is a misunderstanding. Lord Hauksberg's been fooled. I do have information, and it does have to reach Admiral Enriques. I want nothing from you but transportation to Highport. I'll surrender to the Terrans. Not to the Merseians. The Terrans. What's wrong with that? They'll do what the Emperor really wants. If need be, they can turn me over to the enemy. But not before they've heard what I have to tell. Are you a man, Captain? Then behave like one!"

"But we will be boarded," Brummelmann wailed.

"You can hide me. A thousand possible places on a ship. If they have no reason to suspect you, the Merseians won't search everywhere. That could take days. Your crew won't blab. They're as alien to the Merseians as they are to us. No common language, gestures, interests, anything. Let the greenskins come aboard. I'll be down in the cargo or somewhere. You act natural. Doesn't matter if you show a bit of strain. I'm certain everybody they've checked has done so. Pass me on to the Terrans. A year from now you could have a knighthood."

Brummelmann's eyes darted back and forth. The breath rasped sour from his mouth.

"The alternative," Flandry said, "is that I lock you up and assume command."

"I . . . no—" Tears started forth, down into the dirty beard. "Please. Too much risk—" Abruptly, slyly, after a breath: "Why, yes. I will. I can find a good hiding spot for you."

*And tell them when they arrive,* Flandry thought. *I've got the upper hand and it's worthless. What am I to do?*

Persis stirred. She approached Brummelmann and took his hands in hers. "Oh, thank you," she caroled.

"Eh? Ho?" He gawped at her.

"I knew you were a real man.

Like the old heroes of the League, come back to life."

"But you—lady—"

"The message doesn't include a word about me," she purred. "I don't feel like sitting in some dark hole."

"You . . . you aren't registered aboard. They will read the list. Won't they?"

"What if they do? Would I be registered?"

Hope rushed across Flandry. He felt giddy with it. "There are some immediate rewards, you see," he cackled.

"I—why, I—" Brummelmann straightened. He caught Persis to him. "So there are. Oh, ho, ho! So there are!"

She threw Flandry a look he wished he could forget.

He crept from the packing case. The hold was gut-black. The helmet light of his spacesuit cast a single beam to guide him. Slowly, awkward in armor, he wormed among crates to the hatch.

The ship was quiet. Nothing spoke but powerplant, throttled low, and ventilators. Shadows bobbed grotesque where his beam cut a path. Orbit around Starkad, awaiting clearance to descent—must be. He had survived. The Merseians had passed within meters of him, he heard them talk and curled finger around trigger, but they had gone again and the *Rieskessel* resumed acceleration. So Persis had kept Brummelmann

under control; he didn't like to think how.

The obvious course was to carry on as he had outlined, let himself be taken planetside and turn himself in. Thus he would be certain to get his message through, the word which he alone bore. (He had wondered whether to give Persis those numbers, but decided against it. A list for her made another chance of getting caught; and her untrained mind might not retain the figures exactly, even in the subconscious for narco-synthesis to bring forth.) But he didn't know how Enriques would react. The admiral was no robot; he would pass the information on to Terra, one way or another. But he might yield up Flandry. He would most likely not send an armed scout to check and confirm, without authorization from headquarters. Not in the face of Hauksberg's message, or the command laid on him that he must take no escalating action save in response to a Merseian initiative.

So at best, the obvious course entailed delay, which the enemy might put to good use. It entailed a high probability of Brechdan Ironrede's learning how matters stood. Abrams had said, "What helps the other fellow most is knowing what you know." And, finally, Dominic Flandry wasn't about to become a God damned pawn again!

He opened the hatch. The corridor stretched empty. Unhuman music squealed from the fore-castle. Captain Brummelmann was in no hurry to make planet-fall, and his crew was taking the chance to relax.

Flandry sought the nearest life-boat. If anyone noticed, well, all right, he'd go to Highport. But otherwise, borrowing a boat would be the smallest crime on his docket. He entered the turret, dogged the inner valve, closed his faceplate, and worked the manual controls. Pumps roared; exhausting air. He climbed into the boat and secured her own airlock. The turret's outer valve opened automatically.

Space blazed at him. He nudged through on the last possible impetus. Starkad was a huge wheel of darkness, rimmed with red, day blue on one edge. A crescent moon glimmered among the stars. Weightlessness caught Flandry in an endless falling.

It vanished as he turned on interior gravity and applied a thrust vector. He spiraled downward. The planetary map was clear in his recollection. He could reach Ujanka without trouble—Ujanka, the only spot on all of Starkad where he might be safe—for a while.

## Chapter X

Dragoika flowed to a couch, re-

clined on one elbow, and gestured at Flandry. "Don't pace in that caged way, Dommaneeek," she urged. "Take ease by my side. We have scant time alone together, we two friends."

Behind her throaty voice, up through the window, came the sounds of feet shuffling about, weapons rattling, a surflike growl. Flandry stared out. Shiv Alley was packed with armed Kursovians. They spilled past sight, among gray walls, steep red roofs, carved beams: on into the Street Where They Fought, a cordon around this house. Spearheads and axes, helmets and byrnies flashed in the harsh light of Saxo; banners snapped to the wind, shields bore monsters and thunderbolts luridly colored. It was no mob. It was the fighting force of Ujanka, summoned by the Sisterhood. Warriors guarded the parapets on Seatraders' Castle and the ships lay ready in Golden Bay.

*Lucifer!* Flandry thought, half dismayed. *Did I start this?*

He looked back at Dragoika. Against the gloom of the chamber, the barbaric relics which crowded it, her ruby eyes and the striped orange-and-white fur seemed to glow, so that the curves of her body grew disturbingly rich. She tossed back her blonde mane, and the half-human face broke into a smile whose warmth was not lessened by the fangs. "We were too busy since you

came," she said. "Now, while we wait, we can talk. Come."

He crossed the floor, strewn with aromatic leaves in his honor, and took the couch by hers. A small table in the shape of a flower stood between, bearing a ship model and flagon. Dragoika sipped. "Will you not share my cup, Dommaneeek?"

"Well . . . thanks." He couldn't refuse, though Starkadian wine tasted grim on his palate. Besides, he'd better get used to native viands; he might be living off them for a long while. He fitted a tube to his chowlock and sucked up a bit.

It was good to wear a regular sea-level outfit again, air helmet, coverall, boots, after being penned in a spacesuit. The messenger Dragoika sent for him, to the Terran station in the High Housing, had insisted on taking back such a rig.

"How have you been?" Flandry asked lamely.

"As always. We missed you, I and Ferok and your other old comrades. How glad I am the *Archer* was in port."

"Lucky for me!"

"No, no, anyone would have helped you. The folk down there, plain sailors, artisans, merchants, ranchers, they are as furious as I am." Dragoika erected her tendrils. Her tail twitched, the wing-like ears spread wide. "That those vas-giradek would dare bite you!"

"Hoy," Flandry said. "You have the wrong idea. I haven't disowned Terra. My people are simply the victims of a lie and our task is to set matters right."

"They outlawed you, did they not?"

"I don't know what the situation is. I dare not communicate by radio. The vaz-Merseian could overhear. So I had your messenger give our men a note which they were asked to fly to Admiral Enriques. The note begged him to send a trustworthy man here."

"You told me that already. I told you I would make quite plain to the vaz-Terran, they will not capture my Dommaneek. Not unless they want war."

"But—"

"They don't. They need us worse than we need them, the more so since they tried to reach an accord with the vaz-Siravo of the Zletovar."

"They *what?*" Flandry almost shouted. So *that's* what Hauksberg had meant before they'd left for Merseia.

"Yes, and failed, as I always said would happen. Then a Terran force blasted the Siravo base, when we vaz-Kursovikian were unable to. The vaz-Merseian fought them in the air. Heaven burned that night. Since then, our ships often meet gunfire from swimmers, but most of them get through. They tell me combat be-

tween Terran and Merseian has become frequent—elsewhere in the world, however."

*Another step up the ladder* Flandry thought. *More men killed, Tigeries, seafolk. Bynow, I suppose, daily. And in a doomed cause*

"But you have given me small word about your deeds," Dragoika continued. "Only that you bear a great secret. What?"

"I'm sorry." On an impulse, Flandry reached out and stroked her mane. She rubbed her head against his palm. "I may not tell even you."

She sighed. "As you wish." She picked up the model galley. Her fingers traced spars and rigging. "Let me fare with you a ways. Tell me of your journey."

He tried. She struggled for comprehension. "Strange, that yonder," she said. "The little stars become suns, this world of ours shrunk to a dustmote; the weirdness of other races, the terrible huge machines—" She clutched the model tight. "I did not know a story could frighten me."

"You will learn to live with a whole heart in the universe." *You must.*

"Speak on, Dommaneek."

He did, censoring a trifle. Not that Dragoika would mind his having travelled with Persis; but she might think he preferred the woman to her as a friend, and be hurt.

"—trees on Merseia grow taller than here, bearing a different kind of leaf—"

His wristcom buzzed. He stabbed the transmitter button. "Ensign Flandry." His voice sounded high in his ears. "Standing by."

"Admiral Enriques," from the speaker. "I am approaching in a Boudreau X-7 with two men. Where shall I land?"

*Enriques in person? My God, have I gotten myself caught in the gears!* "A-a-aye, aye, sir."

"I asked where to set down, Flandry."

The ensign stammered out directions. A flutter, as his letter had suggested, could settle on the tower of Dragoika's house. "You see, sir, the people here, they're, well, sort of up in arms. Best avoid possible trouble, sir."

"Your doing?"

"No, sir. I mean, not really. But, well, you'll see everyone gathered. In combat order. They don't want to surrender me to, uh, to anyone they think is hostile to me. They threaten, uh, attack on our station if—Honest, sir, I haven't alienated an ally. I can explain."

"You'd better," Enriques said. "Very well, you are under arrest, but we won't take you into custody as yet. We'll be there in about three minutes. Over and out."

"What did he say?" Dragoika

hissed. Her fur stood on end.

Flandry translated. She glided from her couch and took a sword off the wall. "I'll call a few warriors to make sure he keeps his promise."

"He will. I'm certain he will. Uh, the sight of his vehicle might cause excitement. Can we tell the city not to start fighting?"

"We can." Dragoika operated a communicator she had lately acquired and spoke with the Sisterhood centrum across the river. Bells pealed forth, the Song of Truce. An uneasy mutter ran through the Tigeries, but they stayed where they were.

Flandry headed for the door. "I'll meet them on the tower," he said.

"You will not," Dragoika answered. "They are coming to see you by your gracious permission. Ferok is there, he'll escort them down."

Flandry seated himself, shaking his head in a stunned fashion.

He rocketed up to salute when Enriques entered. The admiral was alone, must have left his men in the flutter. At a signal from Dragoika, Ferok returned to watch them. Slowly, she laid her sword on the table.

"At ease," Enriques clipped. H was gray, bladenosed, scarecrow gaunt. His uniform hung flat as armor. "Kindly present me to my hostess."

"Uh . . . Dragoika, captain-director of the Janjevar va-Radovik . . . Vice Admiral Juan Enriques of the Imperial Terrestrial Navy."

The newcomer clicked his heels, but his bow could have been made to the Empress. Dragoika studied him a moment, then touched brow and breasts, the salute of honor.

"I feel more hope," she said to Flandry.

"Translate," Enriques ordered. That narrow skull held too much to leave room for many languages.

"She, uh, likes you, sir," Flandry said.

Behind the helmet, a smile ghosted at one corner of Enriques' mouth. "I suspect she is merely prepared to trust me to a clearly defined extent."

"Won't the Admiral be seated?"

Enriques glanced at Dragoika. She eased to her couch. He took the other one, sitting straight. Flandry remained on his feet. Sweat prickled him.

"Sir," he blurted, "please, is Donna d'Io all right?"

"Yes, except for being in a bad nervous state. She landed soon after your message arrived. The *Rieskessel's* captain had been making one excuse after another to stay in orbit. When we learned from you that Donna d'Io was aboard, we said we would loft a gig for her. He came down at once. What went on there?"

"Well, sir—I mean, I can't say.

I wasn't around, sir. She told you about our escape from Merseia?"

"We had a private interview at her request. Her account was sketchy. But it does tend to bear out your claims."

"Sir, I know what the Merseians are planning, and it's monstrous. I can prove—"

"You will need considerable proof, Ensign," Enriques said bleakly. "Lord Hauksberg's communication laid capital charges against you."

Flandry felt nervousness slide from him. He doubled his fists and cried, with tears of rage stinging his eyes: "Sir, I'm entitled to a court-martial. By my own people. And you'd have let the Merseians have me!"

The lean visage beneath his helmet hardly stirred. The voice was flat. "Regulations provide that personnel under charges are to be handed over to their assigned superiors if this is demanded. The Empire is too big for any other rule to work. By virtue of being a nobleman, Lord Hauksberg holds a reserve commission, equivalent rank of captain, which was automatically activated when Commander Abrams was posted to him. Until you are detached from your assignment, he is your senior commanding officer. He declared in proper form that state secrets and his mission on behalf of the Imperium have been endangered



by you. The Merseians will return you to him for examination. It is true that court-martial must be held on an Imperial ship or planet, but the time for this may be set by him within a one-year limit."

"Will he never! Sir, they'll scrub my brain and kill me!"

"Restrain yourself, Ensign."

Flandry gulped. Dragoika bared teeth but stayed put. "May I hear the exact charges against me, sir?" Flandry asked.

"High treason," Enriques told him. "Mutiny. Desertion. Kidnapping. Threat and menace. Assault and battery. Theft. Insubordination. Shall I recite the entire bill? I thought not. You have subsequently added several items. Knowing that you were wanted, you did not surrender yourself. You created dissension between the Empire and an associated country. This, among other things, imperils his Majesty's forces on Starkad. At the moment, you are resisting arrest. Ensign, you have a great deal to answer for."

"I'll answer to you, sir, not to, to those damned gatortails. Nor to a Terran who's so busy toadying to them he doesn't care what happens to his fellow human beings. My God, sir, you let Merseians search Imperial ships!"

"I had my orders."

"But Hauksberg, you rank him!"

"Formally and in certain procedural matters. He holds a direct Imperial mandate, though. It empowers him to negotiate temporary agreements with Merseia, which then become policy determinants."

Flandry heard the least waver in those tones. He pounced. "You protested your orders, sir. Didn't you?"

"I sent a report on my opinion to frontier HQ. No reply has yet been received. In any event, there are only six Merseian men-of-war here, none above Planet class, plus some unarmed cargo carriers told off to help them." Enriques smacked hand on knee. "Why am I arguing with you? At the very least, if you wanted to see me, you could have stayed aboard the *Rieskessel*."

"And afterward been given to the Merseians, sir?"

"Perhaps. The possibility should not have influenced you. Remember your oath."

Flandry made a circle around the room. His hands writhed behind his back. Dragoika laid fingers on sword hilt. "No," he said to her in Kursovian. "No matter what happens."

He spun on his heel and looked straight at Enriques. "Sir, I had another reason. What I brought from Merseia is a list of numbers. You'd undoubtedly have passed them on. But they do

need a direct check, to make sure I'm right about what they mean. And if I am right, whoever goes to look may run into a fight. A space battle. Escalation, which you're forbidden to practice. You couldn't order such a mission the way things have been set up to bind you. You'd have to ask for the authority. And on what basis? On my say-so, me, a baby ex-cadet, a mutineer, a traitor. You can imagine how they'd buckpass. At best a favorable decision wouldn't come for weeks. Months, more likely. Meanwhile the war would drag on. Men would get killed. Men like my buddy, Jan van Zuyl, with his life hardly begun, with forty or fifty years of Imperial service in him."

Enriques spoke so softly that one heard the wind whittering off the sea, through the ancient streets outside. "Ensign van Zuyl was killed in action four days ago."

"Oh, no." Flandry closed his eyes.

"Conflict has gotten to the point where—we and the Merseians respect each other's base areas, but roving aircraft fight anywhere else they happen to meet."

"And *still* you let them search us." Flandry paused. "I'm sorry sir. I know you hadn't any choice. Please let me finish. It's even possible my information would be discredited, never acted on. Hard

to imagine, but, well, we have so many bureaucrats, so many people in high places like Lord Hauksberg who insist the enemy doesn't really mean harm . . . and Brechdan Ironrede, God, but he's clever . . . I couldn't risk it. I had to work things so you, sir, would have a free choice."

"You?" Enriques raised his brows. "Ensign Dominic Flandry, all by himself?"

"Yes, sir. You have discretionary power, don't you? I mean, when extraordinary situations arise, you can take what measures are indicated, without asking HQ first. Can't you?"

"Of course. As witness these atmospheric combats." Enriques leaned forward, forgetting to stay sarcastic.

"Well, sir, this is an extraordinary situation. You're supposed to stay friends with the Kursovikians. But you can see I'm the Teran they care about. Their minds work that way. They're barbaric, used to personal leadership; to them, a distant government is no government; they feel a blood obligation to me; that sort of thing. So to preserve the alliance, you must deal with me. I'm a renegade, but you must."

"And so?"

"So if you don't dispatch a scout into space, I'll tell the Sisterhood to dissolve the alliance."

"What?" Enriques started. Dragoika bristled.

"I'll sabotage the whole Terran effort," Flandry said. "Terra has no business on Starkad. We've been trapped, conned, blued, and tattooed. When you present physical evidence, photographs, measurements, we'll all go home. Hell, I'll give you eight to one the Merseians go home as soon as you tell old Runei what you've done. Get your courier off first, of course, to make sure he doesn't use those warships to blast us into silence. But then call him and tell him."

"There are no Terran space combat units in this system."

Flandry grinned. The blood was running high in him. "Sir, I don't believe the Imperium is that stupid. There has to be some provision against the Merseians suddenly marshalling strength. If nothing else, a few warcraft orbiting 'way outside. We can flit men to them. A roundabout course, so the enemy'll think it's only another homebound ship. Right?"

"Well—" Enriquez got up. Dra-goika stayed where she was, but closed hand on hilt. "You haven't yet revealed your vast secret," the admiral declared.

Enriquez stood totem-post erect. "Is that everything?"

"Yes, sir. Everything that was needed."

"How do you interpret it?"

Flandry told him.

Enriquez was still for a long mo-

ment. He turned, went to the window, stared down and then out at the sky.

"Do you believe this?" he asked most quietly.

"Yes, sir," Flandry said. "I can't think of anything else that fits, and I had plenty of time to try. I'd bet my life on it."

Enriquez faced him again. "Would you?"

"I'm doing it, sir."

"Maybe. Suppose I order a reconnaissance. As you say, it's not unlikely to run into Merseian pickets. Will you come along?"

A roar went through Flandry's head. "Yes, sir!" he yelled.

"Hm. You trust me that much, eh? And it would be advisable for you to go: a hostage for your claims, with special experience which might prove useful. Although if you didn't return here, we could look for trouble."

"You wouldn't need Kursoviki any longer," Flandry said. He was beginning to tremble.

"If you are truthful and correct in your assertion," Enriquez was motionless a while more. The silence grew and grew.

All at once the admiral said, "Very good, Ensign Flandry. The charges against you are held in abeyance and you are hereby re-attached temporarily to my command. You will return to Highport with me and await further orders."

Flandry saluted. Joy sang in him. "Aye, aye, sir!"

Dragoika rose. "What were you saying, Dommanee?" she asked anxiously.

"Excuse me, sir, I have to tell her." In Kusovikian: "The misunderstanding has been dissolved, for the time being anyhow. I'm leaving with my skipper."

"Hr-r-r." She looked down. "And then what?"

"Well, uh, then we'll go on a flying ship, to a battle which may end this whole war."

"You have only his word," she objected.

"Did you not judge him honorable?"

"Yes. I could be wrong. Surely there are those in the Sisterhood who will suspect a ruse, not to speak of the commons. Blood binds us to you. I think it would look best if I went along. Thus there is a living pledge."

"But—but—"

"Also," Dragoika said, "this is our war too. Shall none of us take part?" Her eyes went back to him. "On behalf of the Sisterhood and myself, I claim a right. You shall not leave without me."

"Problems?" Enriques barked.

Helplessly, Flandry tried to explain.

## Chapter XI

The Imperial squadron de-

ployed and accelerated. It was no big force to cast out in so much blackness. True, at the core was the *Sabik*, a Star-class, what some called a pocket battleship; but she was old and worn, obsolete in several respects, shunted off to Saxo as the last step before the scrap orbit. No one had really expected her to see action again. Flanking her went the light cruiser *Umbriel*, equally tired, and the destroyers *Antarctica*, *New Brazil*, and *Murdoch's Land*. Two scoutships, *Encke* and *Ikeya-Seki*, did not count as fighting units; they carried one energy gun apiece, possibly useful against aircraft, and their sole real value lay in speed and maneuverability. Yet theirs was the ultimate mission, the rest merely their helpers. Aboard each of them reposed a document signed by Admiral Enriques.

At first the squadron moved on gravitics. It would not continue thus. The distance to be traversed was a few light-days, negligible under hyperdrive, appalling under true velocity. However, a sudden burst of wakes, outbound from a large orbit, would be detected by the Merseians. Their suspicions would be excited. And their strength in the Saxonian System, let alone what else they might have up ahead, was fully comparable to Captain Einarsen's command. He wanted to enter this water care-

fully. It was extremely deep.

But when twenty-four hours had passed without incident, he ordered the *New Brazil* to proceed at superlight toward the destination. At the first sign of an enemy waiting there, she was to come back.

Flandry and Dragoika sat in a wardroom of the *Sabik* with Lieutenant (j.g.) Sergei Karamzin, who happened to be off watch. He was as frantic to see new faces and hear something new from the universe as everyone else aboard. "Almost a year on station," he said. "A year out of my life, bang, like that. Only it wasn't sudden, you understand. Felt more like a decade."

"You had your surrogates, didn't you?" Flandry asked. "Pseudosensory inputs and the rest."

"Sure," Karamzin said. "The galley's good too. But those things are just medicine, to keep you from spinning off altogether." His young features hardened. "I hope we meet some opposition. I really do."

Myself," Flandry said, "I've met enough opposition to last me for quite a while."

His lighter kindled a cigaret. He felt odd, back in horizon blue, jetflares on his shoulders and no blaster at his waist: back in a ship, in discipline, in tradition. He wasn't sure he liked it.

At least his position was re-

freshingly anomalous. Captain Einarsen had been aghast when Dragoika boarded—an Iron Age xenon on *his* vessel? But the orders from Enriques were clear. This was a vip who insisted on riding along and could cause trouble if she wasn't humored. Thus Ensign Flandry was appointed "liaison officer," the clause being added in private that he'd keep his pet savage out of the way or be busted to midshipman. (Nothing was said on either side about his being technically a prisoner. Einarsen had received the broadcast, but judged it would be dangerous to let his men know that Merseians were stopping Terran craft. And Enriques' message had clarified his understanding.) At the age of nineteen, how could Flandry resist conveying the impression that the vip really had some grasp of astronautics and must be kept posted on developments? So he was granted communication with the bridge.

Under all cheer and excitement, a knot of tension was in him. He figured that word from the *New Brazil* would arrive at any minute.

"Your pardon," Dragoika interrupted. "I must go to the, what you say, the head." She thought that installation the most amusing thing aboard.

Karamzin watched her leave, then leaned across the table. "What's Starkad like, anyway?"

Our briefing didn't say much."

"Well—" Flandry hunted for words. They were bloodless things at best. You could describe, but you could not make real: dawn white over a running sea, an old and proud city, loveliness on a shadowy ocean floor, two brave races, billions of years since first the planet coalesced, the great globe itself . . . He was still trying when Dragoika returned. She sat down quietly and watched him.

"—and, uh, a very interesting paleolithic culture on an island they call Rayadan—"

Alarms hooted.

Karamzin was through the door first. Feet clattered, metal clanged, voices chouted, under the shrill *woop-woop-woop* that echoed from end to end of the long hull. Dragoika snatched the sword off her shoulder. "What's happening?" she yelled.

"Battle stations." Flandry realized he had spoken in Anglic. "An enemy has been . . . sighted."

"Where is he?"

"Out there. Put away that steel. Strength and courage won't help you now. Come." Flandry led her into the corridor.

They wove among men who themselves pelted toward their posts. Near the navigation bridge was a planetary chartroom equipped for full audiovisual intercom. The exec had decided this would serve the vip and her keeper.

Two spacesuits hung ready. One was modified for Starkadian use. Dragoika had gotten some drill with it en route to the squadron, but Flandry thought he'd better help her before armoring himself. "Here; this fastens so. Now hold your breath till we change helmets on you . . . Why did you come?"

"I would not let you fare alone on my behalf," Dragoika said after her faceplate was closed.

Flandry left his own open, but heard her in his radio earplugs. The alarm penetrated them; and, presently, a voice:

"Now hear this. Now hear this. Captain to all officers and men. The *New Brazil* reports two hyperdrives activated as she approached destination. She is returning to us and the bogies are in pursuit. We shall proceed. Stand by for hyperdrive. Stand by for combat. Glory to the Emperor."

Flandry worked the com dials.

Tuning in on a bridge view-screen, he saw space on his own panel, black and star strewn. Briefly, as the quantum field built up, the cosmos twisted. Compensators clicked in and the scene grew steady; but now *Sabik* outran light and kilometers reeled aft more swiftly than imagination could follow. The power throb was a leonine growl through every cell of his body.

"What does this mean?" Dragoika pressed close to him, seek-

ing the comfort of contact.

Flandry switched to a view of the operations tank. Seven green dots of varying size moved against a stellar background. "See, those are our ships. The big one, that's this." Two red dots appeared. "Those are the enemy, as near as we can tell his positions. Um-m, look at their size. That's because we detect very powerful engines. I'd say one is roughly equal to ours, though probably newer and better armed. The other seems to be a heavy destroyer."

Her gauntlets clapped together. "But this is like magic!" she cried with glee.

"Not much use, actually, except to give a quick over-all picture. What the captain uses is figures and calculations from our machines."

Dragoika's enthusiasm died. "Always machines," she said in a troubled voice. "Glad I am not to live in your world, Domma-neek."

*You'll have to, I'm afraid,* he thought. *For a while, anyway. If we live.*

He scanned the communications office. Men sat before banks of meters, as if hypnotized. Occasionally someone touched a control or spoke a few words to his neighbor. Electromagnetic radio was mute beyond the hull. But with hyperdrive going, a slight modulation could be imposed on the wake to carry mes-

sages. *Sabik* could transmit instantaneously, as well as receive.

As Flandry watched, a man stiffened in his seat. His hands shook a little when he ripped off a print-out and gave it to his pacing superior. That officer strode to an intercom and called the command bridge. Flandry listened and nodded.

"Tell me," Dragoika begged. "I feel so alone here."

"Shhh!"

"Announcement: Now hear this, Now hear this. Captain to all officers and men. It is known that there are six Merseian warships in Saxo orbit. They have gone hyper and are seeking junction with the two bogies in pursuit of *New Brazil*. We detect scrambled communication between these various units. It is expected they will attack us. First contact is estimated in ten minutes. Stand by to open fire upon command. The composition of the hostiles is—"

Flandry showed Dragoika the tank. Half a dozen sparks drove outward from the luminous globe-let which represented her sun. "They are one light cruiser, about like our *Umbriel*, and five destroyers. Then ahead, remember, we have a battleship and a quite heavy destroyer."

"Eight against five of us." Tendrils rose behind the faceplate, fur crackled, the lost child dropped out of her and she said low and

resonant: "But we will catch those first two by themselves."

"Right. I wonder . . ." Flandry tried a different setting. It should have been blocked off, but someone had forgotten and he looked over Captain Einarsen's shoulder.

Yes, a Merseian in the outer-com screen! And a high-ranking one, too.

"—interdicted region," he said in thickly accented Anglic. "Turn back at once."

"His majesty's government does not recognize interdictions in unclaimed space," Einarsen said. "You will interfere with us at your peril."

"Where are you bound? What is your purpose?"

"That is no concern to you, Fodach. My command is bound on its lawful occasions. Do we pass peacefully or must we fight?"

Flandry translated for Dragoika as he listened. The Merseian paused, and she whispered: "He will say we can go on, surely. Thus he can join the others."

Flandry wiped his brow. The room felt hot, and he stank with perspiration in his suit. "I wish you'd been born in our civilization," he said. "You have a Navy mind."

"Pass, then," the Merseian said slowly. "Under protest, I let you by."

Flandry leaned forward, gripping a table edge, struggling not

to shout what Einarsen must do.

The Terran commander said, "Very good. But in view of the fact that other units are moving to link with yours, I am forced to require guarantees of good faith. You will immediately head due galactic north at full speed, without halt until I return to Saxo."

"Outrageous! You have no right—"

"I have the right of my responsibility for this squadron. If your government wishes to protest to mine, let it do so. Unless you withdraw as requested, I shall consider your intentions hostile and take appropriate measures. My compliments to you, sir. Good day." The screen was blanked.

Flandry switched away from Einarsen's expressionless countenance and stood shaking. There trickled through the turmoil in him, *I guess an old-line officer does have as much sense as a fresh-caught ensign.*

When he brought Dragoika up to date, she said coolly, "Let us see that tank again."

The Merseians ahead were not heeding the Terran order. They were, though, sheering off, one in either direction, obviously hoping to delay matters until help arrived. Einarsen didn't cooperate. Like a wolf brought to bay, *New Brazil* turned on her lesser pursuer. *Murdoch's Land* hurried to her aid. On the other side, Umbriel and Sabik herself ac-



celerated toward the Merseian battle wagon. *Antarctica* continued as before, convoying the scoutboats.

"Here we go," Flandry said between clenched jaws. His first space battle, as terrifying, bewildering, and exalting as his first woman. He lusted to be in a gun turret. After dogging his faceplate, he sought an exterior view.

For a minute, nothing was visible but stars. Then the ship boomed and shuddered. She had fired a missile salvo: the monster missiles which nothing smaller than a battleship could carry, which had their own hyperdrives and phase-in computers. He could not see them arrive. The distance was as yet too great. But close at hand, explosions burst in space, one immense fireball after another, swelling, raging, and vanishing. Had the screen carried their real intensity, his eyeballs would have melted. Even through airlessness, he felt the buffet of expanding gases; the deck rocked and the hull belled.

"What was that?" Dragoika cried.

"The enemy shot at us. We managed to intercept and destroy his missiles with smaller ones. Look there." A lean metal thing prowled across the screen. "It seeks its own target. We have a cloud of them out."

Again and again energies ran wild. One blast almost knocked

Flandry off his feet. His ears buzzed from it. He tuned in on damage control. The strike had been so near that the hull was bashed open. Bulkheads sealed off that section. A gun turret was wrecked, its crew blown to fragments. But another nearby reported itself still functional. Behind heavy material and electromagnetic shielding, its men had not gotten a lethal dose of radiation: not if they received medical help within a day. They stayed at their post.

Flandry checked the tank once more. Faster than either battleship, *Umbriel* had overhauled her giant foe. When drive fields touched, she went out of phase, just sufficient to be unhittable, not enough that her added mass did not serve as a drag. The Merseian must be trying to get in phase and wipe her out before—No, here *Sabik* came!

Generators that powerful extended their fields for a long radius. When she first intermeshed, the enemy seemed a toy, lost among so many stars. But she grew in the screen, a shark, a whale, Leviathan in steel, bristling with weapons, livid with lightnings.

Fire sheeted across space. Thunder brawled in hulls. Decks twisted, girders buckled, plates melted. An explosion pitched Flandry and Dragoika down. They lay in each other's arms, bruised, bleeding, deafened, while the

terrifying fire storm prevailed. And passed.

Slowly, incredulously, they climbed to their feet. Shouts from outside told them their eardrums were not ruptured. The door sagged and chemical extinguishers rumbled. Someone called for a medic. The voice was raw with pain.

The screen still worked. Flandry glimpsed *Umbriel* before relative speed made her unseeable. Her bows gaped open, a gun barrel was bent in a quarter circle, plates resembled sea-foam where they had liquefied and congealed. But she ran yet. and so did *Sabik*.

He looked and listened a while before he could reconstruct the picture for Dragoika. "We got them. Our two destroyers took care of the enemy's without suffering much damage. We're hulled in several places ourselves, three turrets and a missile launcher are knocked out, some lines leading from the main computer bank are cut, we're using auxiliary generators till the engineers can fix the primary one, and the casualties are pretty bad. We're operational, though, sort of."

"What became of the battleship we fought?"

"We sank a warhead in her midriff. One megaton, I believe... no, you don't know about that, do you? She's dust and gas."

The squadron reunited and

moved onward. Two tiny green flecks in the tank detached themselves and hastened ahead. "See those? Our scoutboats. We have to screen them while they perform their task. This means we have to fight those Merseians from Saxo."

"Six of them to five of us," Dragoika counted. "Well, the odds are improving. And then, we have a bigger ship, this one, than remains to them."

Flandry watched the green lights deploy. Their objective was to prevent even one of the red sparks from getting through and attacking the scouts. This invited annihilation in detail, but—Yes, evidently the Merseian commander had told off one of his destroyers to each of Einarsen's. That left him with his cruiser and two destroyers against *Sabik* and *Umbriel*, which would have been fine were the latter pair not half crippled. "I'd call the odds even, myself," Flandry said. "But they may be good enough. If we stand off the enemy for . . . a couple of hours, I'd guess . . . we've done what we were supposed."

"But what is that, Dommanee? You spoke only of some menace out here." Dragoika took him by the shoulders and regarded him levelly. "Can you not tell me?"

He could, without violating any secrecy that mattered any longer. But he didn't want to. He tried to

stall, and hoped the next stage of combat would begin before she realized what he was doing. "Well," he said, "we have news about, uh, an object. What the scouts must do is go to it, find out what it is like, and plot its path. They'll do that in an interesting way. They'll retreat from it, faster than light, so they can take pictures of it not where it is at this moment but where it was at different times in the past. Since they know where to look, their instruments can pinpoint it at more than a light-year. That is, across more than a year of time. On such basis, they can easily calculate how it will move for the next several years to come."

Again dread stirred behind her eyes. "They can reach over time itself?" she whispered. "To the past and its ghosts? You dare too much, you vaz-Terran. One night the hidden powers will set free their anger on you."

He bit his lip—and winced, for it was swollen where his face had been thrown against a mouth-control radio switch. "I often wonder if that may not be so, Dragoika. But what can we do? Our course was set for us ages ago, before ever we left our home world, and there is no turning back."

"Then . . . you fare bravely." She straightened in her armor. "I may do no less. Tell me what

the thing is that you hunt through time."

"It—" The ship recoiled. A drumroll ran. "Missiles fired off! We're engaging!"

Another salvo and another. Einarssen must be shooting off every last hyperdrive weapon in his magazines. If one or two connected, they might decide the outcome. If not, then none of his present foes could reply in kind.

Flandry saw, in the tank, how the Merseian destroyers scattered. They could do little but try to outdodge those killers, or outphase them if field contact was made. As formation broke up, *Murdoch's Land* and *Antarctica* closed in together on a single enemy of their class. That would be a slugfest, minor missiles and energy cannon and artillery, more slow and perhaps more brutal than the nearly abstract encounter between two capital ships, but also somehow more human.

The volleys ended. Dragoika howled. "Look, Dommaneeek! A red light went out! There! First blood for us!"

"Yes . . . yes, we did get a destroyer. Whoopee!" The exec announced it on the intercom, and cheers sounded faintly from those who still had their faceplates open. The other missiles must have been avoided or parried, and by now were de-

stroying themselves lest they become threats to navigation. Max Abrams would have called that rule a hopeful sign.

Another Merseian ship sped to assist the one on which the two Terrans were converging, while *New Brazil* and a third enemy stalked each other. *Umbriel* limped on an intercept course for the heavy cruiser and her attendant. Those drove straight for *Sabik*, which lay in wait licking her wounds.

The lights flickered and died. They came back, but feebly. So there was trouble with the spare powerplant, too. And damn, damn, damn, Flandry couldn't do a thing except watch that tank!

The cruiser's escort detached herself and ran toward *Umbriel* to harry and hinder. Flandry clenched his teeth till his jaws ached. "The greenskins can see we have problems here," he said. "They figure a cruiser can take us. And they may be right."

Red crept up on green. "Stand by for straight-phase engagement," said the intercom.

"What did that mean?" Dragoika asked.

"We can't dodge till a certain machine has been fixed." It was as near as Flandry could come to saying in Kursovian that phase change was impossible. "We shall have to sit and shoot."

"Hyperfield contact made," said the intercom. "Fire at will."

Flandry switched to exterior view. The Merseian zigzagged among the stars. Sometimes she vanished, always she reappeared. She was a strictly spacegoing vessel, bulged at the waist like a double-ended pear. Starlight and shadow picked out her armament. Dragoika hissed in a breath. Again fire erupted.

A titan's fist smote. A noise so enormous that it transcended noise bellowed through the hull. Bulkheads split asunder. The deck crashed against Flandry. He whirled into night.

Moments later he regained consciousness. He was falling, falling forever, and blind . . . no, he thought through the ringing in his head, the lights were out, the grays were out, he floated free amidst the moan of escaping air. Blood from his nose formed globules which, weightless, threatened to strangle him. He sucked to draw them down his throat. "Dragoika!" he rasped. "Dragoika!"

Her helmet beam sprang forth. She was a shadow behind it, but the voice came clear and taut: "Dommanek, are you hale? What happened? Here, here is my hand."

"We took a direct hit." He shook himself, limb by limb, felt pain boil in his body but marveled that nothing appeared seriously injured. Well, space armor

was designed to take shocks. "Nothing in here is working, so I don't know what the ship's condition is. Let's try to find out. Yes, hang onto me. Push against things, not too hard. It's like swimming. Do you feel sick?"

"No. I feel as in a dream, nothing else." She got the basic technique of null-gee motion fast.

They entered the corridor. Undiffused, their lamplight made dull puddles amidst a crowding murk. Ribs thrust out past twisted, buckled plates. Half of a spacesuited man drifted in a blood-cloud which Flandry must wipe off his helmet. No radio spoke. The silence was of a tomb.

The nuclear warhead that got through could not have been very large. But where it struck, ruin was total. Elsewhere, though, forcefields, bulkheads, baffles, breakaway lines had given what protection they could. Thus Flandry and Dragoika survived. Did anyone else? He called and called, but got no answer.

A hole filled with stars yawned before him. He told her to stay put and flitted forth on impellers. Saxo, merely the brightest of the diamond points around him, transmitted the specter arch of the Milky Way. It cast enough light for him to see. The fragment of ship from which he had emerged spun slowly—luck, that, or Coriolis force would have sick-

ened him and perhaps her. An energy cannon turret looked intact. Further off tumbled larger pieces, ugly against cold serene heaven.

He tried his radio again, now when he was outside screening metal. With her secondary engines gone, the remnants of *Sabik* had reverted to a normal state. "Ensign Flandry from Section Four. Come in, anyone. Come in!"

A voice trickled through. Cosmic interference seethed behind it. "Commander Ranjit Singh in Section Two. I am assuming command unless a superior officer turns out to be alive. Report your condition."

Flandry did. "Shall we join you, sir?" he finished.

"No. Check that gun. Report whether it's in working order. If so, man it."

"But sir, we're disabled. The cruiser's gone on to fight elsewhere. Nobody'll bother with us."

"That remains to be seen, Ensign. If the battle pattern should release a bogie, he may decide he'll make sure of us. Get to your gun."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Dead bodies floated in the turret. They were not mutilated; but two or three thousand roentgens must have sleeted through all shielding. Flandry and Dragoika hauled them out and cast them adrift. As they dwindled among

the stars, she sang to them the Song of Mourning. *I wouldn't mind such a sendoff*, he thought.

The gun was useable. Flandry rehearsed Dragoika in emergency manual control. They'd alternate at the hydraulic aiming system and the handwheel which recharged the batteries that drove it. She was as strong as he.

Thereafter they waited. "I never thought to die in a place like this," she said. "But my end will be in battle, and with the finest of comrades. How we shall yarn, in the Land of Trees Beyond!"

"We might survive yet," he said. Starlight flashed off the teeth in his bruised and blood-smearred face.

"Don't fool yourself. Unworthy of you."

"Unworthy my left one! I plain don't intend to quit till I'm dead."

"I see. Maybe that is what has made you vaz-Terran great."

The Merseian came.

She was a destroyer. *Umbriel*, locked in combat with the badly hurt enemy cruiser, had inflicted grave harm on her too. *Murdoch's Land* was shattered, *Antarctica* out of action until repairs could be made, but they had accounted for two of her fellows. *New Brazil* duelled yet with the third. The fourth one suffered from a damaged hyperdrive alternator. Until her sweating engineers could repair it, which would tak an hour

or so, her superlight speed was a crawl; any vessel in better shape could wipe her from the universe. Her captain resolved he would go back to where the remnants of *Sabik* orbited and spend the interim cleaning them out. For the general order was that none but Merseians might enter his region and live.

She flashed into reality. Her missiles were spent, but guns licked with fire-tongues and shells. The main part of the battleship's dismembered hulk took their impact, glowed, broke, and returned the attack.

"Yow-w-w!" Dragoika's yell was pure exultation. She spun the handwheel demoniacally fast. Flandry pushed himself into the saddle. His cannon swung about. The bit of hull counter-rotated. He adjusted, got the destroyer's after section in his cross-hairs, and pulled trigger.

Capacitors discharged. Their energy content was limited; that was why the gun must be laid by hand, to conserve every last erg for revenge. Flame spat across kilometers. Steel sublimed. A wound opened. Air gushed forth, white with condensing water vapor.

The destroyer applied backward thrust. Flandry followed, holding his beam to the same spot, driving inward and inward. From four other pieces of *Sabik*, death vomited.

"Man," Flandry chanted, "but you've got a Tigery by the tail!"

Remorselessly, spin took him out of sight. He waited, fuming. When he could again aim, the destroyer was further away, and she had turned one battleship section into gas. But the rest fought on. He joined his beam to theirs. She was retreating under gravitics. Why didn't she go hyper and get the hell out of here? Maybe she couldn't. He himself had been shooting to disable her quantum-field generator. Maybe he'd succeeded.

"Kursovik!" Dragoika shrieked at the wheel. "*Archers* all! Janjevar va-Radovik for aye!"

A gun swiveled toward them. He could see it, tiny at its distance, thin and deadly. He shifted aim. His fire melted the muzzle shut.

The destroyer scuttled away. And then, suddenly, there was *New Brazil*. Flandry darted from his seat, caught Dragoika to him, held her faceplate against his breast and closed his own eyes. When they looked again, the Merseian was white-hot meteorites. They hugged each other in their armor.

*Umbriel*, *Antarctica*. and *New Brazil*: torn, battered, lame, filled with the horribly wounded, haunted by their dead, but victorious, victorious—neared the planet. The scoutships had long since finished their work and de-

parted Empire-ward. Yet Ranjit Singh would give his men a look at the prize they had won.

On the cruiser's bridge, Flandry and Dragoika stood with him. The planet filled the forward view-screen. It was hardly larger than Luna. Like Terra's moon, it was bereft of air, water, life; such had bled away to space over billions of years. Mountains bared fangs at the stars, above ashen plains. Barren, empty, blind as a skull, the rogue rushed on to its destiny.

"One planet," the acting captain breathed. "One wretched sunless planet."

"It's enough, sir," Flandry said. Exhaustion pulsed through him in huge soft waves. To sleep . . . to sleep, perchance to dream. . . . "On a collision course with Saxo. It'll strike inside of five years. That much mass, simply falling from infinity, carries the energy of three years' stellar radiation. Which will have to be discharged somehow, in a matter of seconds. And Saxo is an F5, shortlived, due to start expanding in less than a begayear. The instabilities must already be building up. The impact—Saxo will go nova. Explode."

"And our fleet—"

"Yes, sir. What else? The thing's wildly improbable. Interstellar distances are so big. But the universe is bigger still. No matter how unlikely, anything

which is possible must happen sometime. This is one occasion when it does. Merseian explorers chanced on the datum. Brechdan saw what it meant. He could develop the conflict on Starkad, step by step, guiding it, nursing it, keeping it on schedule . . . till our main strength was marshalled there, just before the blowup came. We wouldn't be likely to see the invader. It's coming in 'way off the ecliptic, and has a very low albedo, and toward the end would be lost in Saxo's glare and traveling at more than 700 kilometers per second. Nor would we be looking in that direction. Our attention would be all on Brechdan's forces. They'd be prepared, after the captains opened their sealed orders. They'd know exactly when to dash away on hyperdrive, Ours—well, the initial radiation will move at the speed of light. It would kill the crews before they knew they were dead. An hour or so later, the first wave of gases would vaporize their ships. The Empire would be crippled and the Merseians could move in. That's why there's war on Starkad."

Ranjit Singh tugged his beard. The pain seemed to strengthen him. "Can we do anything? Plant bombs to blow this object apart, maybe?"

"I don't know, sir. Offhand, I doubt it. Too many fragments would stay on essentially the

same path, I believe. Of course, we can evacuate Starkad. There are other planets."

"Yes. We can do that."

"Will you tell me now?" Dragoika asked.

Flandry did. He had not known she could weep.

## Chapter XII

Highport lay quiet. Men filled the ugly barracks, drifted along the dusty streets, waited for orders and longed for home. Clamor of construction work, grumble of traffic, whine of aircraft bound to battle, were ended. So likewise, after the first tumultuous celebrations, was most merrymaking. The war's conclusion had left people too dazed. First the curt announcement that Admiral Enriques and Fodaich Runei were agreed on a cease-fire while they communicated with their respective governments. Then, day after day of not knowing. Then the arrival of ships; the proclamation that, Starkad being doomed, Empire and Roidhunate joined in hoping for a termination of the interracial conflict; the quick departure of most Imperial Navy personnel; the advent of civilian experts to make preliminary studies for a massive Terran project of another sort. And always the rumord, scuttlebutt; so-and-so knew somebody who knew for a fact that—How could you carry or



as if this were ordinary? Nothing would ever again be quite ordinary. At night, you saw the stars and shivered.

Dominic Flandry walked in silence. His boots made a soft, rhythmic thud. the air was cool around him. Saxo spilled radiance from an enormous blue sky. The peaks beyond Mount Narpa thrust snowfields toward the ghost of a moon. Never had the lanet looked so fair.

The door to the xenological office was ajar. He entered. Desks stood vacant. Ridenour—the civilian head of xenological studies—had sent his staff out in the field, but he had stayed behind, replacing sleep with stimulants as he tried to coordinate their efforts around an entire world. Tall, sandy haired, now thoroughly weary, he was in conversation with a visitor. Flandry's heart climbed into his throat. Lord Hauksberg!

Everyone knew that the *Dronning Margrett* had arrived yesterday, in order that his Majesty's delegate—the Intelligence chief was with him—might make a final inspection too. But only a few—Flandry among them—now knew how touch and go it had been, back on Merseia, before Abrams was able to convince the Hand of the Vach Ynvory that any action against himself or Hauksberg would have meant war with Terra.

Just now, though, Flandry would have preferred staying out

of his lordship's sight, but it was too late for that. He snapped to a salute.

"Well, well." The viscount did not rise from his chair. Only the blond sharp face turned. The elegantly clad body stayed relaxed; the voice was amused. "What have we here?"

"Ensign Flandry, sir. I, I beg pardon. Didn't mean to interrupt. I'll go."

"No. Sit. Been meanin' to get hold of you. I do remember your name, strange as that may seem." Hauksberg nodded at Ridenour. "Go ahead. Just what is the difficulty you mention?"

The xenologist scarcely noticed the newcomer, miserable on a chair. Weariness harshened his tone. "Perhaps I can best illustrate with a typical scene, my lord, taken last week. Here's the Sisterhood HQ in Ujanka."

A screen showed a room whose murals related ancient glories. A Terran and several Tigery females in the plumes and striped cloaks of authority sat in front of a vidiphone. Flandry recognized some. He cursed the accident which brought him here at this minute. His farewells in the city had hurt so much.

Ostrova, the mistress, glared at the piscine face projected before her. "Never," she snapped. "Our rights and needs remain with us. Better death than surrender what our mothers died to gain."

The view shifted, went underwater, where a human team also observed and recorded. Flandry saw a roofless temple, from within. Light pervaded the water, turned it into one emerald where the lodrs of the Seafolk floated free, beyond them a long colonnade overlooking the elfin architecture of what looked like Shellgleam, one of the undersea cities of the vaz-Siravo of Zletovar.

"You would steal everything, then, through the whole cycle, as always you have done," said he who spoke for them. "It shall not be. We must have those resources, when great toil is coming upon us. Do not forget, we keep our guns."

The record included the back-and-forth interpretation of Ridenour's men at either end, so Flandry followed the bitter argument in Kursovikian. Hauksberg could not, and grew restless. After a few minutes, he said, "Most int'restin', but s'pose you tell me what's goin' on."

"A summary was prepared by our station in the Chain," Ridenour said. He flicked a switch. In the screen appeared a lagoon where sunlight glittered on wavelets and trees rustled behind a wide white beach: heartbreakingly beautiful. It was seen from the cabin of a waterboat, where a man with dark-rimmed eyes sat. He gave date and topic, and stated:

"Both factions continue to assert exclusive rights to the archipelago fishing grounds. Largely by shading their translations, our teams have managed to prevent irrevocable loss of temper, but no compromise is yet in sight. We shall continue to press for an equitable arrangement. Success is anticipated, though not for a considerable time."

Ridenour switched off. "You see, my lord?" he said. "We can't simply load these people aboard spaceships. We have to determine which of several possible planets are most suitable for them; and we have to prepare them, both in organization and education. Under ideal conditions, the psychic and cultural shock will still be terrible. Groundlaying will take years. Meanwhile, both races have to maintain themselves."

"Squabblin' over somethin' that'll be a whiff of gas in half a decade? Are such idiots worth savin'?"

"They're not idiots, my lord. But our news, that their world is under a death sentence, has been shattering. Most of them will need a long while to adapt, to heal the wound, before they can think about it rationally. Many never will. And . . . my lord, no matter how logical one believes he is, no matter how sophisticated he claims to be, he stays an animal. His forebrain is nothing but the

handmaiden of instinct. Let's not look down on these Starkadians. If we and the Merseians, we big flashy space-conquering races, had any better sense, there'd be no war between us."

"There isn't," Hauksberg said.

"That remains to be seen, my lord."

Hauksberg flushed. "Thank you for your show," he said coldly. "I'll mention it in my report."

Ridenour pleaded. "If your Lordship would stress the need for more trained personnel here . . . You've seen a little bit of what needs doing in this little bit of the planet. Ahead of us is the whole sphere, millions of individuals, thousands of societies. Many aren't even known to us, not so much as names, only blank spots on the map. But those blank spots are filled with living, thinking feeling beings. We have to reach them, save them. We won't get them all, we can't, but each that we do rescue is one more justification for mankind's existence. Which God knows, my lord, needs every justification it can find."

"Eloquent," Hauksberg said. "His Majesty's government'll have to decide how big a bureaucratic empire it wants to create for the benefit of some primitives. Out o' my department." He got up. Ridenour did too. "Good day."

"Good day, my lord," the xenol-

ogist said. "Thank you for calling. Oh. Ensign Flandry. What'd you want?"

"I came to say goodbye, sir." Flandry stood at attention. "My transport leaves in a few hours."

"Well, goodbye, then. Good luck." Ridenour went so far as to come shake hands. But even before Hauksberg, with Flandry behind, was at the door, Ridenour was back at his desk.

"Let's take a stroll beyond town," Hauksberg said. "Want to stretch my legs. No, beside me. We've things to discuss, boy."

"Yes, sir."

Nothing further was said until they halted in a meadow of long silvery quasigrass. A breeze slid from the glaciers where mountains dreamed. A pair of wings cruised overhead. Were every last sentient Starkadian rescued, Flandry thought, they would be no more than the tiniest fraction of the life which joyed on this world.

Hauksberg's cloak flapped. He drew it about him. "Well," he said, looking steadily at the other. "We meet again, eh?"

Flandry made himself give stare for stare. "Yes, sir. I trust the remainder of my lord's stay on Merseia was pleasant."

Hauksberg uttered a laugh. "You are shameless! Will go far indeed, if no one shoots you first. Yes, I may say Councillor Brech-

dan and I had some rather int'restin' talks after the word came from here."

"I . . . I understand you agreed to, uh, say the space battle was only due to both commanders mistaking their orders."

"Right. Merseia was astonished as we to learn about the rogue after our forces found it by accident." Hauksberg's geniality vanished. He seized Flandry's arm with unexpected force and said sternly: "Any information to the contrary is a secret of state. Revealin' it to anyone, ever so much as hintin' at it, will be high treason. Is that clear?"

"Yes, my lord. I've been briefed."

"And's to your benefit too," Hauksberg said in a milder voice. "Keepin' the secret necessarily involves quashin' the charges against you. The very fact that they were ever brought, that anything very special happened after we reached Merseia, goes in the ultrasecret file also. You're safe, my boy."

Flandry put his hands behind his back, to hide how they doubled up into fists. He'd have given ten years, off this end of his life, to smash that smiling face. Instead he must say, "Is my lord so kind as to add his personal pardon?"

"Oh, my, yes!" Hauksberg beamed and clapped his houlder. "You did absolutely right. For

absolutely the wrong reasons, to be sure, but by pure luck you accomplished my purpose for me, peace with Merseia. Why should I carry a grudge?" He winked. "Regardin' a certain lady, nothin' between friends, eh? Forgotten."

Flandry could not play along. "But we have no peace?" he exploded.

"Hey? Now, now, realize you've been under strain and so forth, but—"

"My lord, they were planning to destroy us. How can we let them go without even a scolding?"

"Ease down. I'm sure they'd no such intention. It was a weapon to use against us if we forced 'em to. Nothin' else. If we'd shown a genuine desire to cooperate, they'd've warned us in ample time."

"How can you say that?" Flandry choked. "Haven't you read any history? Haven't you listened to Merseian speeches, looked at Merseian books, seen our dead and wounded come back from meeting Merseians in space? They want us out of the universe!"

Hauksberg's nostrils dilated. "That will do, Ensign. Don't get above yourself. And spare me the spewed-back propaganda. The full story of this incident is bein' suppressed precisely because it'd be subject to your kind of mis-

interpretation and so embarrass future relations between the governments. Brech dan's already shown his desire for peace, by withdrawin' his forces in toto from Starkad."

"Throwing the whole expensive job of rescue onto us. Sure."

"I told you to control yourself, Ensign. You're not quite old enough to set Imperial policy."

Flandry swallowed a foul taste. "Apologies, my lord."

Hauksberg regarded him for a minute. Abruptly the viscount smiled. "No. Now I was gloatin'. Apologies to you. Really, I'm not a bad sort. And you mean well too. One day you'll be wiser. Let's shake on that."

Flandry saw no choice. Hauksberg winked again. "B'lieve I'll continue my stroll alone. If you'd like to say goodbye to Donna d'Io, she's in the guest suite."

By the time he had reached HQ and gone through the rigamarole of gaining admittance, fury had faded. In its place lay emptiness. He walked into the living room and stopped. Why go further? Why do anything?

Persis ran to him. She wore a golden gown and diamonds in her hair. "Oh, Nicky, Nicky!" She laid her head on his breast and sobbed.

He consoled her in a mechanical fashion. They hadn't had many times together since he came back from the rogue. There

had been too much work for him, in Ujanka on Ridenour's behalf. And that had occupied him so greatly that he almost resented the occasions when he must return to Highport. She was brave and intelligent and fun, and twice she had stepped between him and catastrophe, but she did not face the end of her world. Nor was her own world the same as his: could never be.

They sat on a divan. He had an arm around her waist, a cigaret in his free hand. She looked at the floor. "Will I see you on Terra?" she asked dully.

"I don't know," he said. "Not for some time anyway, I'm afraid. My orders have come through officially, I'm posted to the Intelligence academy for training, and Commander Abrams warns me they work the candidates hard."

"You couldn't transfer out again? I'm sure I could arrange an assignment—"

"A nice, cushy office job with regular hours? No, thanks, I'm not about to become anyone's kept man."

She stiffened as if he had struck her. "I'm sorry," he floundered. "Didn't mean that. It's only, well, here's a job I am fitted for, that serves a purpose. If I don't take it, what meaning has life got?"

"I could answer that," she said low, "but I guess you wouldn't

be able to really understand."

He wondered what the devil to say.

Her lips brushed his cheek. "Go ahead, then," she said. "Fly."

"Uh . . . you're not in trouble, Persis?"

"No, no. Mark's a most civilized man. We might even stay together a while longer, on Terra. Not that that makes any big difference. No matter how censored, some account of my adventures is bound to circulate. I'll be quite a novelty, quite in demand. Don't worry about me. Dancers know how to land on their feet."

A slight gladness stirred in him, largely because he was relieved of any obligation to fret about her. He kissed her farewell with a good imitation of warmth.

It was so good, in fact, that his loneliness returned redoubled once he was in the street again. He fled to Max Abrams.

The commander was in his office, straightening out details before leaving on the same transport that would bear Flandry home. From Terra, though, he would go on furlough to Dayan. His stocky frame leaned back as Flandry burst through the doorway. "Well, hello, hero," he said. "What ails you?"

The ensign flung himself into a chair. "Why do we keep trying?" he cried. "What's the use?"

"Hey-hey. You need a drink."

Abrams took a bottle from a drawer and poured into two glasses. "Wouldn't mind one myself. Hardly set foot on Starkad before they tell me I'm shipping out again." He lifted his tumbler. "Shalom."

Flandry's hand shook. He drained his whisky at a gulp. It burned on the way down.

Abrams made a production of lighting a cigar. "All right, son," he said. "Talk."

"I've seen Hauksberg," jerked from Flandry.

"Nu? Is he that hideous?"

"He . . . he . . . the bastard gets home free. Not a stain on his bloody escutcheon. He'll probably pull a medal. And still he quacks about peace!"

"Whoa. He's no villain. He merely suffers from a strong will to believe. Of course, his political career is bound up with the position he's taken. He can't afford to admit he was wrong. Not even to himself, I imagine. Wouldn't be fair to destroy him, supposing we could. Nor expedient. Our side needs him."

"Sir?"

"Think. Never mind what the public hears. Consider what they'll hear on the Board. How they'll regard him. How neatly he can be pressured if he should get a seat on it, which I hope he does. No blackmail, nothing so crude, especially when the truth can't be told. But an eyebrow

lifted at a strategic moment. A recollection, each time he opens his mouth, of what he nearly got us into last time around. Sure, he'll be popular with the masses he'll influence. So, fine. Better him than somebody else with the same views that hasn't yet bungled. If you had any charity in you, young man—which no one does at your age—you'd feel sorry for Lord Hauksberg."

"But . . . I . . . well—"

Abrams frowned into a cloud of smoke. "Also," he said, "in the longer view, we need the pacifists as a counterweight to the armchair missileers. We can't make peace, but we can't make real war either. All we can do is hold the line. And man is not an especially patient animal by nature."

"So the entire thing is for zero?" Flandry nigh screamed. "Only to keep what little we have?"

The grizzled head bent. "If the Lord God grants us that much," Abrams said, "He is more merciful than He is just."

"Starkad, though—Death, pain, ruin, and at last, the rotten status quo! What were we doing here?"

Abrams caught Flandry's gaze and would not let go. "I'll tell you," he said. "We had to come. The fact that we did, however futile it looked, however distant and alien and no-business-of-ours these poor people seemed, gives

me a little hope for my grandchildren. We were resisting the enemy, refusing to let any aggression whatsoever go unpunished, taking the chance he presented us to wear him down. And we were proving once more to him, to ourselves, to the universe, that we will not give up to him even the least of these. Oh, yes, we belonged here."

Flandry swallowed and had no words.

"In this particular case," Abrams went on, "because we came, we can save two whole thinking races and everything they might mean to the future. We'd no way of knowing that beforehand; but there we were when the time arrived. Suppose we hadn't been? Suppose we'd said it didn't matter what the enemy did in these marches. Would he have rescued the natives? I doubt it. Not unless there happened to be a political profit in it. He's that kind of people."

Abrams puffed harder. "You know," he said, "ever since Akhnaton ruled in Egypt, probably since before then, a school of thought has held we ought to lay down our weapons and rely on love. That, if love doesn't work, at least we'll die guiltless. Usually even its opponents have said this is a noble idea. I say it stinks. I say it's not just unrealistic, not just infantile, it's evil. It denies we have any duty to

act in this life. Because how can we, if we let go of our capability?

"No, son, we're mortal—which is to say, we're ignorant, stupid, and sinful—but those are only handicaps. Our pride is that nevertheless, now and then, we do our best. A few times we succeed. What more dare we ask for?"

Flandry remained silent.

Abrams chuckled and poured

two fresh drinks. "End of lecture," he said. "Let's examine what's waiting for you. I wouldn't ordinarily say this to a fellow at your arrogant age, but since you need cheering up . . . well, I will say, once you hit your stride, Lord help the opposition!"

He talked for an hour longer. And Flandry left the office whistling.

The End

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Name.....Age.....

Address.....County.....

City & State.....Zip No.....

Occupation.....Working Hours.....A.M.....P.M.